Commentary on the Katha Upanishad

by Swami Nirmalananda Giri

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The Past is the Future

In very ancient times a man named Vajrabasa decided to perform a rite intended to give the performer great merit. The rite entailed the giving away of all the performer's possessions. However he had no such intention, and instead was going to give away only his cattle–and of them only the useless ones: the old, the barren, the blind, and the lame. His son, Nachiketa, observing this, came to his father and said: "Father, do not repent thy vow! Consider how it has been with those that have gone before, and how it will be with those that now live. Like corn, a man ripens and falls to the ground; like corn, he springs up again in his season."[1]

There is no use denying it: we all follow in the path of Vajrabasa on occasion, though some do it more exuberantly. This is especially deadly in the realm of spiritual life.

I well remember when two newly-made Indian friends from South India asked me wonderingly: "What is an 'Indian giver'?" When I said it meant someone who promised but did not deliver, or who gave and then took back, they were really bewildered. But when I explained that it was not the Indians who were the "givers" but the deceitful white men, they understood–and to *my* confusion thought it was very funny. (When I told them about "Honest Injun?" and "The only good Indian is a dead Indian" they laughed till they cried, and thereafter frequently asked: "Honest Injun?" when I told them something.) It is not funny when we are "Indian givers" in spiritual life, just as double-tongued and devious with God and our own spirit as the politicians were with the Native Americans.

One of the funniest and most typical examples is found in the comic motion picture, *The End.* In one scene Burt Reynolds is swimming in the ocean about to drown. He starts shouting out to God how much of his income he vows to give if he survives. The percentage goes up and up to the total amount. But then he sees that there is a chance he may make it back to shore. So the percentage starts dropping in proportion to how near he gets to the land! Finally he is telling God that he will be giving nothing, and if God does not like it, that is just too bad. We are very much (often exactly) like that ourselves. When we think we are not going to have something, or will have no use for it, we generously offer it to God or renounce it. But the moment we see a need or a use for it, then we announce to ourselves that God would not expect us to hand it over or renounce it.

Many people start out spiritual life with great enthusiasm, ready to dedicate and sacrifice in order to attain liberation. But as time goes by, the sands in the hourglass of will and interest grow less and less, shifting back to the bottom level of ego and the material life until what remains is so feeble and negligible it would be better if it, too, were eliminated in honesty.

The principle that we reap only and exactly what we sow is an absolute in spiritual life. Here are Saint Paul's words on the subject: "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting. And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not."[2] Fainting is a very real possibility for all of us, and that is why these warning words of

[1] Katha Upanishad 1:1:6

[2] Galatians 6:7-9

Nachiketa were written in the upanishad: "Father, do not repent thy vow! Consider how it has been with those that have gone before, and how it will be with those that now live. Like corn, a man ripens and falls to the ground; like corn, he springs up again in his season."

The law of reaping what has been sown–and conversely not reaping what has not been sown–is to be taken most seriously in all aspects of life, but especially in spiritual matters. Solomon cautions us: "When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for...better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay."[3] The question here is not that of God being angry or sad at our non-payment, but the negative effect our own perfidy will have on us directly. It is not God that rewards and punishes, but our own self, and its justice is inexorable. So asking God to release us or forgive us means positively nothing–it is our own self we are dealing with and *it* cannot be gotten around in any degree whatsoever.

Sad to say, there are many examples of "those that have gone before" who foolishly reneged on their own selves and suffered the consequences, from simple unhappiness to abject and long-lasting misery, and even death. This latter is no exaggeration, I know of examples myself. If you will excuse me, I will not cite any examples at all, for it is simply too bleak. Just do not be one yourself! But I will tell you the principle I have seen demonstrated over and over again: *Whatever a person abandons his spiritual life to keep or to gain will be (usually abruptly or even violently) taken away from him and he will never regain or restart his spiritual life in this incarnation.* I have never seen an exception. Never. (I am, however, not speaking of merely risking or retarding the personal spiritual life–we all do that just from making mistakes or from silly foibles–but of the actual giving up and turning from, even rejecting of, one's spiritual life and obligations. This is fatal.)

At every step of our spiritual life we must keep in mind the law of cause and effect and "onsider how it has been with those that have gone before, and how it will be with those that now live." And lest we think that if we escape the karmic reaction in this life we are "home free," Nachiketa added: "Like corn, a man ripens and falls to the ground; like corn, he springs up again in his season." So there are future live in which our neglect can come to fruition in many forms–all inimical to our further progress.

Of course, the words of Nachiketa only have meaning to the wise. As Krishna told Arjuna: "Even a wise man acts according to the tendencies of his own nature. All living creatures follow their tendencies. What use is any external restraint? If a man keeps following my teaching with faith in his heart, and does not make mental reservations, he will be released from the bondage of his karma. But those who scorn my teaching, and do not follow it, are lost. They are without spiritual discrimination. All their knowledge is a delusion."[4]

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[3] Ecclesiastes 5:4

[4] Bhagavad Gita 3:33, 31,32

Seeing Death, Seeing Life

Visiting Death

Long ago a man named Vajasrabasa undertook a ritual to gain divine favor, but deliberately performed it in such a way that only misfortune could accrue to him rather than good. His virtuous sin, Nachiketa, tried to reason with him, but in response he uttered the curse: "Thee I give to Death!"

Nachiketa was no ordinary son. He was an accomplished yogi, one who could penetrate into the unseen worlds, and in keeping with his unjust father's unjust words he went to the realm presided over by Yamaraja, the King of Death. Yama welcomed him with great respect and told Nachiketa to ask three favors from him. Being a worthy son of an unworthy father, his first request was that his father should suffer no anxiety about his fate, but that his anger should be appeased so that when Nachiketa returned home his father would recognize and welcome him. Yama agreed.

Next Nachiketa asked to learn the sacrificial rite that leads to heaven. Yama agreed to that also and taught him. Then Yama asked him to make his third request. The upanishadic text continues:

"And then Nachiketa considered within himself, and said:

"'When a man dies, there is this doubt: Some say, he is; others say, he is not. Taught by thee, I would know the truth. This is my third wish.'

"'Nay,' replied Death, 'even the gods were once puzzled by this mystery. Subtle indeed is the truth regarding it, not easy to understand. Choose thou some other boon, O Nachiketa.'

"But Nachiketa would not be denied.

"'Thou sayest, O Death, that even the gods were once puzzled by this mystery, and that it is not easy to understand. Surely there is no teacher better able to explain it than thou–and there is no other boon equal to this.'

"To which, trying Nachiketa again, the god replied:

"'Ask for sons and grandsons who shall live a hundred years. Ask for cattle, elephants, horses, gold. Choose for thyself a mighty kingdom. Or if thou canst imagine aught better, ask for that–not for sweet pleasures only but for the power, beyond all thought, to taste their sweetness. Yea, verily, the supreme enjoyer will I make thee of every good thing. Celestial maidens, beautiful to behold, such indeed as were not meant for mortals—even these, together with their bright chariots and their musical instruments, will I give unto thee, to serve thee. But for the secret of death, O Nachiketa, do not ask!'

"But Nachiketa stood fast, and said: 'These things endure only till the morrow, O Destroyer of Life, and the pleasures they give wear out the senses. Keep thou therefore horses and chariots, keep dance and song, for thyself I How shall he desire wealth, O Death, who once has seen thy face? Nay, only the boon that I have chosen–that only do I ask. Having found out the society of the imperishable and the immortal, as in knowing thee I have done, how shall I, subject to decay and death, and knowing well the vanity of the flesh–how shall I wish for long life?

"'Tell me, O King, the supreme secret regarding which men doubt. No other boon will I ask.'

“Whereupon the King of Death, well pleased at heart, began to teach Nachiketa the secret of immortality.”[5]

The mystery

As Yama told Nachiketa, even those powerful beings that control the forces of the cosmos have been puzzled by the mystery of whether those who have gone beyond death can be said to exist or not to exist. Reflective human beings have agonized over the same problem. When they came to Buddha with the question he refused to give any answer, saying that whichever he told them they would misunderstand and distort his words. So he said nothing. Consequently, to say that Buddha taught the non-existence of an immortal self and individual immortality is perhaps an even worse distortion than that which he sought to avoid through silence.

Yama, however, was not talking to word-juggling ignoramuses, but to an eminently qualified inquirer. Yet, testing the strength of Nachiketa’ interest in such a profound matter, he attempted to dissuade him from pressing the question. When that failed, he resorted to that which has effectively deflected “seekers” through the history of humanity. He offered him long-lived and prosperous progeny, vast material wealth and possessions, unlimited pleasure and unlimited power, and finally, dominion over even the subtle worlds and all that is therein. Throughout countless ages the mere promise or prospect of such acquisitions have turned awakening consciousnesses from the path of immortality and led them further into the morass of mortal life. But Nachiketa could not be moved from his original resolve to learn the truth regarding immortality.

The Katha Upanishad cannot have been unknown to Jesus when he lived and studied in India, and it can be speculated that it was in the context of the teachings of this upanishad that he asked his disciples: “What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?”[6] I have to admit that when as a primary grade-schooler I first heard this verse read out in church, I immediately thought: “No. The real question is: ‘What will a man *take* in exchange for his soul?’” Through the years I kept questioning as to whether things were a blessing for life or a bribe to embrace inner death. This, too, we see so often. From those early years and even till now I have seen so many bribes offered and taken, all of them cheap and paltry compared to what the seekers would have gained if they had turned away from the offers.[7] And as I have pointed out, in every instance the promise was withdrawn unfulfilled or the “gain” was ruthlessly wrested from their grasp and they were left broken and empty. People do not need to die to become “lost souls.” The suffering may not be eternal, but it is no less terrible for that. I can truthfully say that throughout my life the most desolate souls I have met were those that said to me with sad nostalgia: “I used to be…,” and then mentioned some abandoned spiritual calling or involvement. The wheels of life were grinding them down and tormenting them with the bitter memory of their loss along with the impossibility of their regaining that which they had so carelessly and foolishly tossed aside for “life” long ago.

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[5] Katha Upanishad 1:1:20-29

[6] Matthew 16:26

[7] O could you offer every earthly treasure–
Diamonds and pearls of the sea–
The turning from them I would gladly whisper:
“Christ has set me free.”

Let us attend!

In Eastern Christian worship the exclamation "Let us attend!" is usually uttered before some special reading or prayer is about to be intoned. We should indeed attend to the words of Nachiketa when he replied to Yama's offer:

"These things endure only till the morrow, O Destroyer of Life, and the pleasures they give wear out the senses. Keep thou therefore horses and chariots, keep dance and song, for thyself I How shall he desire wealth, O Death, who once has seen thy face? Nay, only the boon that I have chosen–that only do I ask. Having found out the society of the imperishable and the immortal, as in knowing thee I have done, how shall I, subject to decay and death, and knowing well the vanity of the flesh–how shall I wish for long life? Tell me, O King, the supreme secret regarding which men doubt. No other boon will I ask."

In Christianity and Buddhism a great deal of emphasis is placed on the memory of death as a universal principle and the particular mortality of each one of us. In the West this is superficially shrugged off as morbidity and "unhealthy," but it can be salutary indeed. It was only sensible that Nachiketa, having come face-to-face with Death, should disregard all that which the human race has been madly seeking throughout its existence. For in the East (including Christianity) only that which lasts forever without any change is considered Real. Everything else is unreal, illusory. Therefore that which can change and pass away is even now essentially *nothing*. Who, then, would value any such? There is no need for a lengthy philosophical analysis of psychic niceties or suchlike. The fact of their evanescent nature turns all desired objects to mere fantasies in the consciousness of the wise.

"Whereupon the King of Death, well pleased at heart, began to teach Nachiketa the secret of immortality."

In sum: renunciation is the key to the secret of immortality.

The Good and the Pleasant

"The good is one thing; the pleasant is another. These two, differing in their ends, both prompt to action. Blessed are they that choose the good; they that choose the pleasant miss the goal."[8]

How simple and direct these words are! When, after years of being soaked (sometimes drowned) in mere religion, when I found *dharma* one of the most beautiful and wonderful things about it was its incredible simplicity. The religion I had had before was simplistic–childishly so–but at the same time it was complex, convoluted and tangled, because that was state of mind that had produced it and which it produced in those unfortunate enough to accept and follow it. (Many avoided the problem by professing the religion but not really following it.) In contrast, the profound dharma was also as simple as the great ocean, gathering all into unity. I had tried reading Western philosophers and theologians, and found them impossible to understand–mostly because they were not really saying anything. The first time I opened a book by Shankara, the greatest philosopher India has ever produced, it was with real anxiety. Would I break apart on the rock of his verbiage? Not at all. Every sentence was so exquisitely clear, every concept so unbelievably simple–and equally vast and deep. I understood why: Shankara *knew* by his acquisition of Divine Consciousness. When Shankara talked to me God was speaking. And God knows how to communicate.

Neither Shankara nor the Upanishads or the Gita really require a commentary. All a "commentator" can really do is expand what is already there so we do not rush from point to point in the original text and miss so much of it. Actually, all my commentaries are really Pauses and Reflections. There is no need to explain to you what those sacred texts mean. You can easily understand them for yourself. So all I am really doing is ruminating over them with you. We are digesting them together. It is very satisfying. At least to me–I hope it is to you, also.

The good and the pleasant

"The good is one thing; the pleasant is another." This does not have to be the situation–the problem is in us. Since the good dissolves the ego and frees us from its seemingly eternal domination and bondage, it is only natural that those who are inured, even addicted, to its rule will find the good bitter in the extreme. In the closing chapter of the Bhagavad Gita Krishna speaks of the one who chooses the good: "Deep his delight after strict self-schooling: sour toil at first but at last what sweetness, the end of sorrow."[9] Who would not choose this? Just about everybody. Why? Because it requires "strict self-schooling." We have to educate and deliver ourselves. Neither God nor any holy being can do it for us. Therefore those who cling to their ego-addiction avidly "take refuge" in and "surrender" to and "place all my trust" in God, gods, gurus, saints, teachers, a religion, and whatever, knowing at least subconsciously that it will not work, *for they alone can do the needful.* The Holy Ones have already done all they could do for them. They have given the message and pointed out the way. Now it is their turn to get to work. Otherwise nothing will happen. And in their perversity this satisfies them completely,

[8] Katha Upanishad 1:2:1

[9] Bhagavad Gita 18:37

though they cover it up with religiosity and "devotion." Those who do wish to achieve the good must shake off their self-hypnosis and begin the labor. They will be surprised at how pleasant it really is, and in time will come to realize that they were enjoying pain and avoiding the real pleasure that is found only in spiritual life.

Krishna describes the pleasant as essentially "sweet at first but at last how bitter: that pleasure is poison."[10] It is not just harmful–it is deadly. Saint Ignatius of Antioch,[11] a disciple of Saint John the Evangelist, wrote of those who, drinking a sweet drink that contains poison, "sweetly drink in their death." "Aren't we having fun?" "Come on–live!" "What are you afraid of?" "Why don't you find out what it is all about?" "What do you know about life?" These are the desperate appeals of those whose consciousness is awakened enough for them to be tormented by the example of those who have more fully awakened and who "touch not the cup–it is death to the soul."

The wise know that the good and the pleasant utterly differ in their ends. The pleasant leads to ever more addiction, a craving for ever-increasing intoxication, and finally complete collapse and destruction.

> When senses touch objects
> The pleasures therefrom
> Are like wombs that bear sorrow.
> They begin, they are ended:
> They bring no delight to the wise.[12]

On the other hand:

> Self-controlled,
> Cut free from desire,
> Curbing the heart
> And knowing the Atman,
> Man finds Nirvana
> That is in Brahman,
> Here and hereafter.[13]

"For when a man's heart has reached fulfillment through knowledge and personal experience of the truth of Brahman, he is never again moved by the things of the senses. Earth, stone and gold seem all alike to one who has mastered his senses. Such a yogi is said to have achieved union with Brahman. Then he knows that infinite happiness which can be realized by the purified heart but is beyond the grasp of the senses. He stands firm in this realization. Because of it, he can never again wander from the inmost truth of his being."[14]

The good also leads to complete collapse and destruction–the collapse and disintegration

[10] Bhagavad Gita 18:38

[11] Epistle to the Trallians

[12] Bhagavad Gita 5:22

[13] Bhagavad Gita 5:26

[14] Bhagavad Gita 6:8, 21

of the ego and its attendants, ignorance and desire. Then:

He knows bliss in the Atman
And wants nothing else.
Cravings torment the heart:
He renounces cravings.
I call him illumined.[15]

The man of faith,
Whose heart is devoted,
Whose senses are mastered:
He finds Brahman.
Enlightened, he passes
At once to the highest,
The peace beyond passion.[16]

His mind is dead
To the touch of the external:
It is alive
To the bliss of the Atman.
Because his heart knows Brahman
His happiness is for ever.[17]

Already, here on earth,
Before his departure,
Let man be the master
Of every impulse
Lust-begotten
Or fathered by anger:
Thus he finds Brahman,
Thus he is happy.[18]

Motivating forces

"These two, differing in their ends, both prompt to action." Both the good and the pleasant impel us to actions, but they do so in completely different ways.

The good points us to the way of benefit in a completely intelligent and non-emotional way. For example, the good never motivates us by selfish means such as promising reward or threatening punishment–this is the way of evil, including much of religion. The good motivates us toward itself simply by revealing its inherent value.

The pleasant is altogether different. It only shows us its external appearance. It does not reason with us, but entices or even compels us to seize it. The pleasant only shows us its

[15] Bhagavad Gita 2:55

[16] Bhagavad Gita 4:39

[17] Bhagavad Gita 5:21

[18] Bhagavad Gita 5:23

immediate or short-term effect, but completely hides from us its long-term effects and blinds us to its inherent defects. The archetypal example of this is found in the Bible. There we are told that "when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat."[19] Here we see all the problems with the pleasant: only the external is considered, emotion and instinct come to dominate and eclipse reason, and the ultimate effect is completely unapparent.

In sum, the good reveals but the pleasant conceals. It is necessary that we see the good as truly good and the pleasant as harmful and even evil. This is not easy.

The bigger picture

One of the problems with prevailing religion of all kinds is its incredible small-sightedness. Like the pleasant-oriented and pleasant-obsessed ego which it supports and feeds, it is concerned with only the moment at hand or with goals that are utterly irrelevant to the real nature of the human being. When we understand who/what we really are, then alone can we comprehend what is the sole purpose of our existence: conscious union with the Absolute. In light of this the upanishad concludes: "Blessed are they that choose the good; *they that choose the pleasant miss the goal*." So the discrimination between the good and the pleasant is no light matter.

A genuine test of character

In the twenty-fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew we find a parable about foolish and wise souls. Most of us do not really care if we are foolish, just as long as no one labels us so. But we *should* care, and so the upanishad continues its teaching, saying:

"Both the good and the pleasant present themselves to men. The wise, having examined both, distinguish the one from the other. The wise prefer the good to the pleasant; the foolish, driven by fleshly desires, prefer the pleasant to the good."[20] There is a lot of truth in these few lines, some of it embarrassing, but nevertheless beneficial for us. (The good is not the pleasant, even in philosophy.)

"Both the good and the pleasant present themselves to men." Whatever may be the excuses we may make for ourselves, even portraying ourselves as weak or victims, no one, NO ONE, forces anything upon us in life, however much it may seem otherwise. Rather, the good and the pleasant simply "present themselves" to us. We are totally responsible for our response to them, although, like Adam and Eve back in Genesis,[21] we try to put the blame on someone else, on some external factor.

It is really essential to us as we move through life (hopefully forward) that although our deluded experience seems just the opposite, in reality all "things" are completely neutral–it is our response to them that really gives them any character such as good, bad, destructive, positive, etc. A little thought will show this. The deadliest poison is harmless if we do not make contact with it. Conversely, the best medicine is worthless if we do not consume it. Or think of this: garbage seems heavenly food to a starving person, but not to someone who is well fed; a child's toy means nothing to a mature adult. Nothing has an innate ability to draw or force us–all the drawing and forcing is in our own mind as it responds to the object. We can

[19] Genesis 3:6

[20] Katha Upanishad 1:2:2

[21] "And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat....And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat." (Genesis 3:12,13)

blame no one at any time. It is all in us. If there are no grass seeds in the soil no grass will grow. The seeds have to be in us to sprout and grow and bear fruit as thinking, willing, and acting.

"The wise, having examined both, distinguish the one from the other." Viveka, the ability to distinguish between the real and the unreal, between the true and the false, between the transient and the permanent, is indispensable for the serious spiritual aspirant. The wise possess and exercise this faculty, the eye of wisdom, by deeply examining whatever is presented to them and discerning whether it is the good or the merely pleasant they are being confronted with. Intelligence comes into the foreground, feeling and emotion being banished from the mental field altogether. Human beings operate either rationally or instinctually-emotionally. The wise are rational at all times. At all times. For example, real love is clearsighted–never blind–whereas infatuation masquerading as love is both blinding and blindness.

Preferring and driven

If two people are walking, one toward the north and the other toward the south, the difference between them is very little–just the direction they are facing. But in the matter of the wise and the foolish the differences are profound, for they are rooted in their very being, especially the mind and intellect. Even as a child I always thought that the statement of Abraham to Lazarus that "between us and you there is a great gulf fixed,"[22] was spiritually symbolic, that a great gulf did indeed lie between the Godwards and the earthwards. The upanishad is outlining this nature of this gulf for us by describing its effects on both.

The wise prefer the good–they are not enticed, coerced, or "somehow drawn" to the good. They intelligently–yes, intellectually–prefer it because they know its nature and its effects. This is true of everything in their life, mundane, mental, and spiritual. This is markedly true in the matter of religion. The religious expression of the wise is always, peaceful, clear, intelligent, informed, and practical–it works.

The foolish, however are not so. They truly are a "troubled sea"[23] "tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind"[24] as Isaiah and Saint Paul observed. "Driven by fleshly desires," it only follows that they prefer the pleasant to the good, for the "flesh" cannot even perceive the good to any appreciable degree; but they create a lot of illusions about it–all negative and self-assuring. Their religion is subhuman, of course, catering to their emotions and their demands for the indulgence of their whims and vices. However educated they may be, or how boring and dry their church services, still animality reigns and all manner of subhuman behavior is sanctioned and even elevated and "spiritualized." Wallowing in the sty of their comforting and indulgent religion, they cast many a contemptuous (and secretly guilty) glance at those who are not so, and create many a *bon mot* about their "unnatural denial and repressions" hinting of sinister implications for those who "run away from life" and "refuse to face themselves," and "expect too much themselves and others." But they are still only talking pigs. Even though they like to say they are "only human" and that God understands they are.

Driven by pleasure/pain, their humanity becomes submerged in the animality impressed in their subconscious by millions of incarnations in subhuman forms. Merely possessing a human body is no guarantee of humanity. The redoubtable Dr. Bronner in a conversation with

[22] Luke 16:26

[23] Isaiah 57:20

[24] Ephesians 4:14

one of the monks of our ashram referred to some people as "not yet HUMAN!" He was right. A house does not make a home and a human body does not make a human. Humanity only dawns when intelligence dominates and wisdom is gained. We need not be intellectual in the academic sense, but we must be intelligent. Then if we use our intelligence there is a chance we may become wise and thereby cross the great gulf.

The plain facts

Chances are Nachiketa never got voted "most popular" of anything and may not even have been "a good mixer." But Yama assessed him quite highly, saying: "Thou, O Nachiketa, having looked upon fleshly desires, delightful to the senses, hast renounced them all. Thou hast turned from the miry way wherein many a man wallows."[25] Now this is a thumbnail portrait of a wise human being, but it is a test of the wise and the foolish. The wise will accept it and the foolish will not. So we should take a square look at it and our reaction will tell us which we are.

First of all, Nachiketa is not naive or "innocent." He knows what is going on, even if most things should not be going on. He has not turned away, but has deeply looked into the desires of the flesh and the delights of the senses. He knows what the fake life of the foolish is all about, and he has *renounced* it ALL–not just a little bit or even most, but the whole mess. Why? Because he does not identify with the flesh and the senses, but with the intelligence and his true self that is pure consciousness. He knows he is not the perishable body.

"Thou hast turned from the miry way wherein many a man wallows," says Yama. Nachiketa sees that the world of body-sense enslavement is a suffocating bog–not just ugly and repulsive to the wise, but deadly. He knows, with Jesus, that: "Ye cannot serve God and mammon."[26] He also knows that in reality once a person has reached the level of human evolution he cannot really live like an animal without dire consequences, including terrible suffering. As humans we have simply gone beyond that to which the foolish cling to so obsessively.

This is strikingly illustrated in Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son found in the fifteenth chapter of Saint Luke. After wasting his inheritance, the man hired himself out to a pig farmer. This is a symbol of someone who has enslaved himself to the lower nature and the senses–pigs that wallow in filth, eat garbage, and demand more. "And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him." Like nearly all of us, the poor soul wants to feed on and be satisfied with the garbage that the pigs revel in, grunting: "This is living!" But it cannot be; we are not pigs; we are not the senses or the body.

No matter how much we desire to regress to animal living, we cannot really do so. And usually only pain will wake us up from such folly. When we do wake up, like the Prodigal we will resolve: "I will arise and go" forward in the path of evolution, leaving the sty and its pigs behind. The rising and the going will not be easy, but there simply is nothing else for a true human being to do. Moreover, the path will not be long, though it may seem so, for time drags when we are having struggle and pain. Jesus indicates this, saying: "when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him." All the perfected souls that have taught us about spiritual life have assured us that the effort required of us is but a token–nevertheless a token that must be paid. If we can but get a glimpse or conceive a bit of what it will be to have arisen and travelled the way, then the price

[25] Katha Upanishad 1:2:3

[26] Matthew 6:24

will seem so small. Amazingly, Saint Paul tells us that Jesus "for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God."[27] Just think: *the joy*. This should be our perspective, too.

Again, renunciation is the way of immortality.

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[27] Hebrews 12:2

The Way of Ignorance

The Two Ways

Yama, the King of Death, praises Nachiketa, saying: "Far from each other, and leading to different ends, are ignorance and knowledge. Thee, O Nachiketa, I regard as one who aspires after knowledge, for a multitude of pleasant objects were unable to tempt thee."[28]

It is interesting to note that the concept of Two Ways of human life are to be found in all religious traditions. Jesus spoke of the Broad Way and the Strait Way, and when they met in Jerusalem and issued a joint spiritual letter,[29] his apostles began by saying there are two Ways in this world. Long before that, the Katha Upanishad spoke of the Way of Ignorance and the Way of Knowledge.

The Way of Ignorance is the subject of the three verses we will be considering, but first Yama tells us the key trait of one who aspires to knowledge: he cannot be tempted by the pleasant. This is because he sees its nature and its results. The pursuers of the Way of Ignorance are not such as Nachiketa, and Yama now tells us about them and the results of their walking in that Way.

The Way of Folly

"Living in the abyss of ignorance yet wise in their own conceit, deluded fools go round and round, the blind led by the blind."[30] That certainly is plain speaking! Let us go through this verse bit by bit.

Living in the abyss of ignorance. This word "abyss" is very disturbing in this context. It indicates that the condition of ignorance is profound–not something than can easily be removed or escaped. Rather, the person is sunk deep into the darkness of ignorance, so deep that he cannot see anything but darkness, so deep that he can hardly be extricated from it–at least in this life. It is not that his condition is utterly hopeless, but that he simply has neither awareness nor interest. If that dawns, he is on his way out of the abyss. But most of the time it does not happen. In a routine of the Firesign Theatre, a disease is described with the concluding words: "The only cure for which is death." In many (actually most) cases of abysmal ignorance this is the truth. The individual requires another birth before he can arise from the depths. Until then he should be left alone.[31]

Yet wise in their own conceit. Somewhere I read the words: "The problem with ignorance is that it picks up confidence as it goes along." Since ignorance is a by-product of ego, as ignorance increases so does egotism. Increasing in this alternating cycle, invincible arrogance and invincible ignorance arise, take hold and consume the ignorant person. This is really an ugly picture; but an accurate one. Thinking themselves wise, how can the ignorant ever see the truth about themselves–both the higher and the lower selves–and try to rectify themselves? They cannot. Not content to revel in their private kingdom of ignorance, they then set about

[28] Katha Upanishad 1:2:4

[29] The Didache, usually called *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles.*

[30] Katha Upanishad 1:2:5

[31] "Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone" (Hosea 4:17). "So I gave them up unto their own hearts' lust: and they walked in their own counsels" (Psalms 81:12). "He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still" (Revelation 22:11).

to aggressively expand it through influence of others. And if they cannot influence they will dominate and bully until they have extended their sphere of darkness. Again: ugly but accurate. Living in the fantasy-land of ego, they sink deeper, believing that they are rising.

Deluded fools go round and round. Cycling in confusion, the foolish spiral downward, seeming to go up and down but really only going down and down. In their minds they veer back and forth, up and down, agitating themselves and others, but in actuality they just keep on sinking. Because of this they continually go round and round in the wheel of birth and death, perpetually bound to the torture wheel of samsara–and reveling in every moment. They have discovered the secret of happiness in this world: unconsciousness.

The blind led by the blind.[32] Ignorance as well as misery loves company, in fact needs it desperately and thrives on it. Supporting each other they stumble through this world until death claims them and they get to do it all over–and over and over. When they are not being the leader and the led, they are the pusher and the pushed, the dominating and the dominated, the victimizer and the victim–alternating in these two roles, they reel onward and downward.

Blind to eternity

"To the thoughtless youth, deceived by the vanity of earthly possessions, the path that leads to the eternal abode is not revealed. *This world alone is real; there is no hereafter*–thinking thus, he falls again and again, birth after birth, into my jaws."[33]

Rendered heedless of the truth about his condition through involvement with materiality–both his body and objects in the world–and deluded by what he thinks is going on, the ignorant never sees the way beyond the abyss in which he dwells. He simply cannot see it, just as we cannot hear frequencies beyond the range of our hearing or see things beyond the range of our sight. He is deaf and blind to spirit in all its aspects. Even if by some chance he should seek the way, if he finds it he will not know it, nor if he come face to face with the way will he realize it. Just the opposite. He will despise and deny it, even denouncing it as delusive or evil. On the other hand, he will exult in devilish religion, teachers, and practices, seeking them out and devoting himself to them. Let me give two examples I know of personally.

A great master used to plead with a young man to learn meditation, assuring him that his progress would be rapid and he would be liberated in this life. But he did not get initiated. When the master was about to leave his body he told his disciples that if the man ever came to the ashram and expressed an interest, one of them was to initiate him immediately. He never did. But a dozen or so years later one of the biggest frauds the "yoga world" has ever produced came to town charging money for a worthless technique. The man was in poor financial condition, and could not really afford it, but he immediately slapped down the cash and got initiated into nothing.

Two Buddhist friends of mine visit a prison and instruct the inmates in Buddhist philosophy and spiritual practice. They are practicers of the Pure Land School of Buddhism. Whenever they try to get the prisoners to chant the liberating name of Amida Buddha they refuse and insist that they chant Tibetan "power mantras" instead. They love bondage and lust after control. They belong where they are.

"This world alone is real; there is no hereafter" is thought by many of the foolish, but

[32] "Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch" (Matthew 15:14). This is but one of Jesus quotations from Indian scriptures.

[33] Katha Upanishad 1:2:6

there are many more who do not actually *think* it but *live* as though they did. Denial of spiritual realities is done more by deeds than by words. It does not matter how devoutly or spiritually we may think, if we live carelessly and materially, as centered on our ego as any ignoramus we would regard as "unspiritual."

This is the real test. Thinking the material world alone is real, the ignorant return to it again and again, living in the jaws of death. If we do the same, then we are fools. If we do not, then we are wise.

The Mystery of the Self

Seeing is not always seeing and hearing is not always hearing. In some instances it is misperception, and in others it is no perception at all. This is illustrated by an incident from the life of Jesus. While speaking to the people, he prayed: "Father, glorify thy name. Then came there a voice from heaven, saying, I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again. The people therefore, that stood by, and heard it, said that it thundered: others said, An angel spake to him."[34] Four levels of perception are manifested here. One level knew that God had spoken, another thought that an angel had spoken, another thought it had only thundered, and the fourth did not hear a thing.

As a rule, phenomena can be classified in fours. The four castes spoken of in Indian scriptures are not social strata based on physical birth, but four levels of awareness–in fact, they correspond to the four responses to the speaking of God that Saint John has recorded in this Gospel passage. Krishna follows the same classification in the Bhagavad Gita, saying: "There are some who have actually looked upon the Atman, and understood It, in all Its wonder. Others can only speak of It as wonderful beyond their understanding. Others know of Its wonder by hearsay. And there are others who are told about It and do not understand a word."[35] But it is the Katha Upanishad we are looking into at the moment, so let us see what Yama had to say to Nachiketa about this matter of understanding the Self (atman).

"To many it is not given to hear of the Self. Many, though they hear of it, do not understand it. Wonderful is he who speaks of it. Intelligent is he who learns of it. Blessed is he who, taught by a good teacher, is able to understand it."[36]

The "silent" majority

"To many it is not given to hear of the Self." Most people–by far the most people–have never heard of the Self and never will in this lifetime. Oh, yes, they will hear about an immortal soul/spirit that a tyrannical God will reward or punish according to His whim, but the real nature of that spirit as part of–and therefore one with–the Supreme Reality and therefore supreme reality itself, eternal, immortal, and indivisible, will never be even hinted at nor will they come up with the concept on their own. Further, it will not be even suggested to them, either from within or without, that the spirit nature is the Self–nothing more–and is the only true identity they can ever have.

Being unchanging, this Self cannot be affected or changed by anything–no, not even by God. It is what it is, just as much as God is what He is. It is, therefore, not only the most worthwhile thing for us to get involved with, it is the *only* thing we can possibly be involved with. Everything else is illusion. This glorious truth of the Self, known only to the seers of Sanatana Dharma (there are others in various religions that hold this, but they are looked upon as mavericks and heretics by those groups), must be the sole perspective in which we view our present situation as consciousnesses experiencing the process of evolution. (It is the

[34] John 12:28,29

[35] Bhagavad Gita 2:29

[36] Katha Upanishad 1:2:7

ever-shifting dance of prakriti[37] to which we have become attached that evolves; we are ever the same, ever the One.)

Living in the silence of ignorance, what can they do? No much, obviously.

The uncomprehending

"Many, though they hear of it, do not understand it." This is true of many who, though ostensibly adherents to Sanatana Dharma, really do not get the idea–especially about the Self. These are those that frequent temples, ashrams and saints as a kind of insurance against calamity and trouble. Then there are those that only run to those holy places when problems arise. Obviously they have no degree of comprehension regarding the Self.

Neither do most who profess to understand the Self. This is seen by their words and deeds. If someone believes the building is on fire we can tell it by their attempts to get out. Similarly, if someone believes in the truth about the Self they will order their entire lives accordingly–not just assent to the concept. To *know* the Self, to enter into the fullness of its consciousness and being, will be the focus of their life and thought.

Sri Ramakrishna often said that if a thief learned of a great treasure being kept in the room next to where he was living, he would not be able to sleep for thinking about how to break through the wall and get it. In the same way, those who really understand about the wonder of the Self will not rest until they have (re)claimed the Treasure for themselves. Spiritual purification and spiritual practice are the means for breaking through the wall and claiming the prize.

We have a dilemma here, also: Only those who understand about the self will be motivated to engage in tapasya to realize it fully; yet only those who are engaged in tapasya can have any glimmer of the self and be motivated to practice! The solution lies in the fact that in time the Self begins to urge us to its realization, that we will intuit the presence of the Self and start moving toward the point where, when we hear about it, we will accept and act upon what we hear.

It is interesting to see that Yama does not mention those who reject or deny the truth of the Self. Apparently to him they do not even exist.[38]

Wonderful

We joke sometimes about the exaggerations of the theatrical and motion picture industries. "It is colossal! Magnificent! The greatest ever!" and suchlike continually pour out in conversation and advertisements. The song, *Hollywood*, assures us that out there "you're 'terrific' if you're good." Divinity, on the other hand, has a somewhat different viewpoint,[39] so Yama tells Nachiketa: "Wonderful is he who speaks of it." He is not speaking of a parrot, a spiritual phonograph, but of one who speaks with awakened awareness–even if not from perfect knowledge or realization. "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh."[40] The implication here is that we should seek out and only listen to those who speak of the Self, from the Self, and in the

[37] Prakriti: Causal matter; the fundamental power (shakti) of God from which the entire cosmos is formed; the root base of all elements; undifferentiated matter; the material cause of the world. Also known as Pradhana.

[38] "Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you." (Matthew 7:22,23)

[39] "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8,9)

[40] Matthew 12:34

perspective of the Self. Theology is usually only so much distracting noise, and so is most "religious" and "spiritual" talk. Buddha likened a true teacher or teaching to a finger pointing at the moon–only that which points us to our own Reality is itself real and worthwhile. Such a teacher or teaching is wonderful indeed.

Intelligent

The word "stupid" gets tossed about in casual conversation as much as does "wonderful," and no one relishes being thought stupid. (Few care whether they actually are stupid, just as long as nobody notices or points it out.) Yama, with his very definite perspective, assures Nachiketa that the intelligent person is the one who pursues knowledge of the Self. This is done in two ways: listening to or reading the teachings about the Self of those who have themselves known the self, and–most importantly–by actively seeking to know one's own Self through careful analysis (swadhyaya) and spiritual practices, most especially meditation. This latter point is very necessary for us to grasp. Intellectually intelligent people love learning–and they should. However, it is easy to fall into the trap of studying all the theory and not getting down to any practice to determine the validity of the theory.

Saint Silouan of Athos said that delight in the study of theology was the false mysticism of the ego. When Swami Turiyananda first met Sri Ramakrishna he was intensely studying Vedanta for at least six hours a day. Upon hearing of this, Sri Ramakrishna was astounded. "What else does Vedanta say except that Brahman alone is real, the world is illusory, and the Self and Brahman are one?"[41] he asked. "So why do you need six hours of study for that?" Turiyananda had the good sense to understand, and began to devote himself to japa and meditation in order to know the Self–not just know about the Self. In the West it is a common error to assume that knowing about something is the same thing as knowing it. More than once I have read in catechisms that knowing God is accomplished by reading the catechism! *That* is stupid.

Blessed

To be wonderful and intelligent is good, but to be blessed is the ideal. So Yama concludes: "Blessed is he who, taught by a good teacher, is able to understand it." This is because a good teacher does not just impart theoretical knowledge, but reveals to the student the practical means by which he can open his understanding through meditation to behold and know the Self. Krishna, being the Supreme Teacher, instructs Arjuna in the Gita about meditation, saying: "If he practices meditation in this manner, his heart will become pure."[42] He must be...united constantly with me in his meditation."[43] "The practice of serenity, sympathy, meditation upon the Atman, withdrawal of the mind from sense-objects, and integrity of motive, is called austerity of the mind."[44] "Make a habit of practicing meditation, and do not let your mind be distracted. In this way you will come finally to the Lord, who is the light-giver, the highest of the high."[45]

[41] He was referring to the words of Adi Shankaracharya: "I shall tell you in half a sloka [verse] what has been written in millions of books: Brahman is real. The world is illusory. The jiva is none other than Brahman."

[42] Bhagavad Gita 6:12

[43] Bhagavad Gita 12:14

[44] Bhagavad Gita 17:16

[45] Bhagavad Gita 8:8

How to Either Know or Not Know the Self

Let the student (who is often a "buyer") beware

"The truth of the Self cannot be fully understood when taught by an ignorant man, for opinions regarding it, not founded in knowledge, vary one from another. Subtler than the subtlest is this Self, and beyond all logic. Taught by a teacher who knows the Self and Brahman as one, a man leaves vain theory behind and attains to truth."[46]

By "the truth of the Self" is meant both the philosophical, scriptural truth and the direct perception of the truth experienced in meditation. However Yama is at this point speaking more on the side of learning the intellectual truth about the Self, its nature, and its possibility of realization.

We all know the incredible and impenetrable tangle of theologies that constitute what most people think are the religions of the world. The reason for this is simple: most (almost all) teachers of religion are fundamentally ignorant. Ignorant not in the intellectual sense, but in the intuitive sense. Since we do need an intellectual road map to help us in our search for direct experience of the Self, this is a serious matter. For an attempt to figure out the truth of the Self in a purely theoretical manner will only add to the prevailing confusion. We will just become one more voice in the cacophony of ignorant religion or philosophy. Nothing is worse than an ignoramus that believes he has an "inside track." As Jesus observed: "If the 'light' that is in thee be [actually] darkness, how great is that darkness!"[47]

Consequently, it is a most detrimental thing to come into the orbit of an ignorant teacher and accept his words–and even worse to act on them. Some years back there was a most interesting motion picture called *Apprenticed to Murder*. It was based on the actual experience of a man who as an adolescent came into contact with "wise man" in the southern hills. This man conducted a kind of church whose members studied a nineteenth-century book of what might be called folk magic. He had genuine psychic abilities and really did work miracles. This boy became his student and ended up being jailed as an accomplice in the man's murder of someone he considered a "black magician." This is a rather drastic example, but frankly it is much less destructive in the long run than involvement with many contemporary teachers, the worst of whom are in the yoga world. To be confused is worse than being merely ignorant, and being flawed and distorted by wrong yoga practices is even worse.

Beyond the intellect

"Subtler than the subtlest is this Self, and beyond all logic," says Yama. Being subtler than the subtlest, the Self cannot possibly be perceived by any sense–including those of the subtle bodies–or conceived of by even the highest and subtle reaches of the intellect. Yet, the Self can be known. This is possible only when "taught by a teacher who knows the Self and Brahman as one, a man leaves vain theory behind and attains to truth" through the practice of meditation, instruction in which a qualified teacher will give. This really marks out the knowledgous teacher from the ignorant teacher. The ignorant teacher will only expound

[46] Katha Upanishad 1:2:8

[47] Matthew 6:23. "Seest thou a man wise in his own conceit? there is more hope of a fool than of him" (Proverbs 26:12). "Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight!" (Isaiah 5:21). "Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools" (Romans 1:22).

theory, "proving" what he teaches by intellectual means. The worthy teacher may say much the same words, but will point the student to the means by which he can attain the vision of the Self. He will establish the student in the practice of correct meditation, without which nothing that is real can possibly be known.

A bit more. Yama tells us that the teacher should be one who *knows*–not a rhetorician or theoretician. Now it is impossible for us to look into the consciousness of a teacher, so how will we know he has real knowledge? We cannot in an absolute sense, but Yama gives us a trait that at least assures us the teacher is not altogether astray: He will affirm the oneness of the Self and Brahman. No matter how cleverly, convincingly, and cutely he may speak, however much he may appeal to our emotions and deluded intellects, if he does not insist on the unity of the Self and Brahman, saying with the Chandogya Upanishad "THAT THOU ART," he is unworthy and to be turned away from. Unhappily, there are a lot of ignoramuses who appeal to egotistical fools by saying: "You are God." The true teacher says not that we are God, but that God us. There is an infinite difference. Furthermore, the real teacher does not just tell us this fact, he instructs in the means to find it out for ourself. These two traits must be present before we even begin to think about accepting a teacher as a valid guide.

The ultimate test of a teacher is our own capacity, made accessible to us by his instruction, to leave all speculation behind and enter into the Reality that is both Brahman and the Self while remaining ever One. Then all the gods and sages will say of us what Yama said of Nachiketa: "The awakening which thou hast known does not come through the intellect, but rather, in fullest measure, from the lips of the wise. Beloved Nachiketa, blessed, blessed art thou, because thou seekest the Eternal. Would that I had more pupils like thee!"[48]

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[48] Katha Upanishad 1:2:9

From the Unreal to the Real

Eternal values

There is an obscure Protestant song entitled "With Eternity's Values in View." Musically it is not much, but philosophically it is profound. We are not temporal, mortal beings, and if we live our life as though we were, then only confusion and chaos can result. Instead we must see ourselves as eternal beings presently dreaming the dream of evolution–a dream whose culmination is awakening, toward which all of our attention and awareness should be focused. Nachiketa knew this, but Yama underlined it, telling him:

"Well I know that earthly treasure lasts but till the morrow. For did not I myself, wishing to be King of Death, make sacrifice with fire? But the sacrifice was a fleeting thing, performed with fleeting objects, and small is my reward, seeing that only for a moment will my reign endure."[49] What are a billion years compared to eternity? Not even a glimmer. Why, then, do we scramble after such short-lived earthly goals, goals that even if attained prove to be worthless since they vanish away so quickly? Why do we continually deny our eternity and affirm the delusion of temporality? Because we identify thoroughly with that which is temporal and finite.

Buddha and two fools

Buddha once encountered two deluded ascetics. One always behaved like a dog and the other like a water buffalo. No explanation is given for their behavior. Perhaps it related to some deity worshipped by them. For example, a dog would be related to Bhairava, a form of Shiva, and a water buffalo to the goddess Durga. However it might be, they wanted to know from Buddha what the results of their way of life would be. He refused to answer, but they kept insisting, so he told them plainly that if they were lucky they would be reborn as a dog and a water buffalo, and if they were unlucky they would find themselves in astral hells corresponding to their aberrative life and thought. As anticipated by Buddha, they wailed and fussed and went away without gaining any sense or rectifying their foolish ways. We are just like them, except we are hypocrites, claiming to believe in the eternal, unconditioned Self and acting just the opposite.

The dilemma of the gods

It is true that there is nothing on this earth we cannot attain if we put forth the effort. In previous creations human beings performed elaborate rituals to become "gods" in this creation, including Brahma the creator. They succeeded, and the result was that they suffer more pain and anxiety than human beings do and are more subject to mental aberrations that humans. Furthermore, they are bound until the end of this creation cycle to fulfil their offices and can in no way shirk or abandon them. So they are more bound than any human being could ever be. In other words, their heaven has turned out to be a hell. Still their main anxiety is fear over falling from their exalted status and returning to human form. They have learned nothing from their experience. (Do we?)

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[49] Katha Upanishad 1:2:10

A metaphysical fact

"But the sacrifice was a fleeting thing, performed with fleeting objects, and small is my reward, seeing that only for a moment will my reign endure." Within this lament of Yama is embedded a profound truth regarding spiritual life.

Only the spirit is eternal and everlasting. Everything else, however highly evolved or sacred, is temporal and impermanent. However long-lived they may be, in time they will dissolve back into the primal energy of manifestation and we will lose them–never really having "had" them at all. Consequently, the wise seek only for the eternal spirit, though using the material and the temporal to aid them in their search. For example, physical health is not enlightenment, but it certainly makes the enlightenment process easier. Material sufficiency relieves us from anxiety and helps us pursue spiritual life without distraction. And so forth.

Discipline is essential for material life, and even more so for spiritual life. Yet, discipline will not take us to the goal–it will greatly facilitate our going, but we must never mistake proficiency in any discipline or practice for spiritual attainment. In the same way, any type of yogic practice that does not deal directly with Consciousness will not result in enlightenment. Like discipline, it may help us in our ascent to higher awareness, but it must not be mistaken for that awareness.

"Sadhana" means spiritual practice that leads to the revelation of the Real (Sat). The temporal does not lead to the eternal, therefore real sadhana must begin and end in spirit consciousness. No material procedure is sadhana, nor is any externally-oriented practice sadhana. The only true sadhana is the turning inward of the mind and the perception of the inmost spirit. In other words, meditation alone is sadhana–meditation free of all mechanics and gimmicks, simple and direct, leading to the ultimate Simplicity that is the Self. We must begin with spirit if we are to end with spirit. That is why Patanjali briefly outlines the nature of God, telling us that "His manifesting Word is Om," and concluding: "Its japa and meditation is The Way." For constant japa/meditation utilizing the Eternal Om will render us an Infinite Reward.

In just a few more verses the Katha Upanishad encapsulates it thus: "Of that goal which all the Vedas declare, which is implicit in all penances, and in pursuit of which men lead lives of continence and service, of that will I briefly speak. It is–OM. This syllable is Brahman. This syllable is indeed supreme. He who knows it obtains his desire. It is the strongest support. It is the highest symbol. He who knows it is reverenced as a knower of Brahman."[50]

The truth

All truth is a two-edged sword. It tells us what IS and what IS NOT. The truth about the Self and Brahman also tells us what is not the Self or Brahman. Those of us who are clinging to the unreal will find this painful or at least uncomfortable. But we have to let go of the unreal to lay hold of the Real. If we do not like this fact we need to bother with Real, but keep on whirling around in our little hamster wheel we call life. But the wise listen and act upon Yama's next words to Nachiketa:

'The goal of worldly desire, the glittering objects for which all men long, the celestial pleasures they hope to gain by religious rites, the most sought-after of miraculous powers—all these were within thy grasp. But all these, with firm resolve, thou hast renounced."[51]

[50] Katha Upanishad 1:2:16,17

[51] Katha Upanishad 1:2:11

To enter into Life we turn away from all fulfillments of material and temporal desires, no longer attracted by their false glitter. Nor do we aspire to some heaven or heavenly pleasures offered to us by ego-oriented religion–things that also end as painfully as the joys of earth. Even miracles mean nothing to us, for they occur only in the realm of duality, the realm of death.

Where is Life?

Seeing that Nachiketa was yearning to pass from death to Immortality, Yama continues: "The ancient, effulgent being, the indwelling Spirit, subtle, deep-hidden in the lotus of the heart, is hard to know. But the wise man, following the path of meditation, knows him, and is freed alike from pleasure and from pain."[52]

First of all, before analyzing this, it must be realized that Yama is talking about us. Certainly, we are finite and God is infinite, but substantially (essentially) we are the same. So Yama is talking about our true nature in these amazing words, and we should consider them accordingly.

Ancient

We are *puranam*–ancient. God is called the *Purana Purusha*, the Ancient Person. Since we coexist with Him, we, too, are ancient. Shankara in his commentary explains that in this context puranam does not just mean incredibly old, but *everlasting*. That is, we, too, are primeval beings. "There was never a time when I did not exist, nor you, nor any of these kings. Nor is there any future in which we shall cease to be,"[53] Krishna tells Arjuna in the Gita.

Our eternity is very hard for us to grasp even theoretically because we have been caught in the time-space web for ages beyond calculation. Creations have come and gone as we barely crawled along the evolutionary path. We just cannot conceive of eternity, for it is not time without end, it is that state of being which lies beyond time. Actually, we are living in that state right now, but have completely lost sight of it and imagine we are immersed in the sea of constant change, of constant birth and death with their attendant sufferings.

To view ourselves as eternal, immortal beings is therefore most important, for without that perspective "life" will totally overwhelm us, drowning us in illusions without either numbering or end. Yet when we step back, withdrawing our consciousness into our own reality, it will end instantly. It is the stepping back and withdrawal that takes the time.

Effulgent Being

Devam means "shining one." We are ourselves "the light that shines in darkness"[54] for we are a living part of the Light of Life.[55] Consequently we must turn within for illumination. Until we are perfected in that in-turning we do need some external lights such as holy books and teachers, but it is unwise to become dependent on any outer source of knowledge. Eventually we must get it all from within, having become *swayamprakash*, self-illumined.

Certainly we should be discontented with our present ignorant and bound state of being, but there is no room here for condemning or loathing ourselves for being sinners, weak,

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[52] Katha Upanishad 1:2:12

[53] Bhagavad Gita 2:12

[54] John 1:5

[55] John 1:4

foolish, etc. Our discontent with our present state should arise from our conviction that we are ourselves divine–for ***devam*** means that as well. We are living far beneath our selves. Knowing that, we should turn around, stop our descent, and begin ascending to our real place–far beyond any childish heaven or relative condition of any type however exalted.

Since we are self-effulgent, all guidance must eventually come from within. We may not be able to tap the inner light right now to the needed degree, but in time our atma alone must be our guide through and beyond this life. We must learn to rely on our capacity for pure Knowing.

As a child and a young man I looked upon myself as a "Bible-believing Christian," so naturally I believed that Jesus Christ was the Light of the World.[56] But it was only when I found the wisdom of the Upanishads that I really believed Jesus when he said: "*Ye* are the light of the world."[57] For the fundamental necessity is to realize that we are the Light also. "God is light"[58] and so are we, for we and God are one, not two. No one who claims to be spiritually enlightened can teach otherwise, "for with thee is the fountain of life: in thy light shall we see light."[59] The Light of God reveals the Light of our own Self. The closer we get to our real self, the closer we come to God, and vice versa. Then "the sun shall be no more thy light by day; neither for brightness shall the moon give light unto thee: but the Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy God thy glory."[60] For we shall know ourselves as Light and Glory. This is not egotism, for in the Light the ego melts away. "The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day."[61]

Indwelling Spirit

"Indwelling spirit" not only tells us that we are pure consciousness by nature, but the important fact that our consciousness is the noumenon which dwells at the heart of all phenomena. That wherever there is any "thing" there are we as the reality that is the substratum of all existence–even of illusion. That is why we find our selves if we pierce the veil of illusion or look within. We are omnipresent.

Subtle

We do not perceive the Self because our conditionings from aeons of relative existence has coarsened our perceptions. Experiencing materiality over and over and over again has oriented and confined our awareness to the grossest levels of existence. Further, it has oriented and confined our awareness to externalities. Any reflective person can readily understand the need to turn our awareness inward to perceive the self, but more is needed: we must refine our minds, rendering them more and more subtle so they can eventually see the Most Subtle: the Self.

Meditation refines the mind no doubt, but we have to do more than that, otherwise an entire life will simply not be enough time to produce the requisite refinement. Therefore

[56] "Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life" (John 8:12, John 9:5).

[57] Matthew 5:14

[58] I John 1:5

[59] Psalms 36:9

[60] Isaiah 60:19

[61] Proverbs 4:18

Patanjali in Yoga Sutras 2:30,32 lists the necessary means for the physical and psychic refinement without which the Self cannot be realized to any degree. They are:

1) Ahimsa: non-violence, non-injury, harmlessness

2) Satya: truthfulness, honesty

3) Asteya: non-stealing, honesty, non-misappropriativeness

4) Brahmacharya: sexual continence in thought, word and deed as well as control of all the senses

5) Aparigraha: non-possessiveness, non-greed, non-selfishness, non-acquisitiveness

6) Shaucha: purity, cleanliness

7) Santosha: contentment, peacefulness

8) Tapas: austerity, practical (i.e., result-producing) spiritual discipline

9) Swadhyaya: introspective self-study, spiritual study

10) Ishwarapranidhana: offering of one's life to God

All of these deal with the innate powers of the human being–or rather with the abstinence and observance that will develop and release those powers to be used toward our spiritual perfection, to our self-realization and liberation. Equally important is their effect on our minds: harmonization, strengthening, and refinement.

These ten factors and successful meditation are actually interdependent. Without meditation they are impossible to accomplish, and without their steady and complete observance meditation becomes impossible. This is why after nearly forty years of the "yoga boom" in this country nothing significant has been accomplished spiritually. A lot of money has been made, organizations formed and exalted over the lives of their members, and a great deal of folly and neurosis has resulted (what to say of virulent scandals) but that is all. Why? Because these ten needful elements are utterly omitted from the spheres of their existence. They are never mentioned, much less advocated. The only exception is *ahimsa*–limited only to opposition to war. This is because everybody wants to be nice and the pop-yoga movement was born during the "Hell no, we won't go!" war-protesting hip era. However, the most obvious personal application of ahimsa: advocacy of abstention from the eating of animal flesh, is usually absent.

The sensible aspirant cannot do otherwise than make these ten disciplines part of his life if he truly wishes to render himself capable of beholding the Self and living as the Self.

Deep-hidden in the lotus of the heart

Why are we out of touch with God and our Self? Because we are skimming on the surface of "things" while Reality is "deep-hidden in the lotus of the heart"–the Core of All. Actually, Reality is deep-hidden in the core of the things we are experiencing. We only need to see into them to find the True. That is why in Buddhism we find the word Penetration so frequently used. We must See Deeply. That is, we need not turn away or withdraw from outer phenomena, but rather develop the capacity to see into them to their ultimate Depth. To do this we do enter inside through meditation, but since there really is neither Inside nor Outside in the truest sense, in time–through the practice of meditation–we come to see all there is to see: The One.

Hard to know

We have all experienced getting a mistaken idea or impression stuck in our head that we could not get rid of even when we knew better. The same is true of habit patterns. Living in

conditioned existence we ourselves have become conditioned–or at least we identify with the conditionings of the ever-shifting mind. This is the only reason that the Self is hard to know. It has nothing to do with the nature of the Self, but with the conditioning of the mind–conditioning resulting from billions and billions of lifetimes as everything from an atom of hydrogen onward to where we are now. It is not easy to undo in a few years what we have taken thousands of creation cycles to build up! Yet it can be done and will be done in time. We just have to understand the way things work and that it will take time. Nevertheless, the words "hard to know" assure us that the Self *can* be known.

The way and its effects

"But the wise man, following the path of meditation, knows him, and is freed alike from pleasure and from pain." It is the path of meditation that leads to Self-knowledge, none other.

> The uncontrolled mind
> Does not guess that the Atman is present:
> How can it meditate?
> Without meditation, where is peace?
> Without peace, where is happiness?[62]

It is not that Self-knowledge renders us incapable of experiencing pleasure or pain, but of being in bondage to them–that is, being subject to *reaction* to pleasure and pain.

> The bonds of his flesh are broken.
> He is lucky, and does not rejoice:
> He is unlucky, and does not weep.
> I call him illumined.[63]

> To obey the Atman
> Is his peaceful joy;
> Sorrow melts
> Into that clear peace:
> His quiet mind
> Is soon established in peace.[64]

[62] Bhagavad Gita 2:66

[63] Bhagavad Gita 2:57

[64] Bhagavad Gita 2:65

Finding the Treasure

All the world seeks happiness. Our American Declaration of Independence says that the pursuit of happiness is an inalienable right for every human being. But see how miserable people really are beneath the frantic veneer of the pursuit of happiness in an ever-changing and pain-producing world. The problem? We are looking in the wrong direction. We are seeking outward when we should be seeking inward. We are seeking the non-self instead of the Self. From the Katha Upanishad we learn the right line of action.

"The man who has learned that the Self is separate from the body, the senses, and the mind, and has fully known him, the soul of truth, the subtle principle–such a man verily attains to him, and is exceeding glad, because he has found the source and dwelling place of all felicity. Truly do I believe, O Nachiketa, that for thee the gates of joy stand open."[65]

Separate

"The Self is separate from the body, the senses, and the mind." Therefore the body, senses, and mind cannot even "see" the Self as an object, and certainly cannot possibly experience the Self to any degree. The happiness experienced by body, senses, and mind is not true happiness at all, but an approximation, a sham that distracts us from the real thing, inevitably leading us to frustration and all-around misery. This must be learned. Then the Self itself must be known.

Soul of truth, subtle principle

The Self is the very soul of Truth, of Reality. It is not just the basis of reality, it IS reality. Apart from it there simply is nothing. It is subtle beyond all conception–but not beyond all experience. It is when we enter fully into the Being that is the Self, that we "attain to him," that boundless happiness shall be ours. For the Boundless itself shall be ours.

Source and dwelling

Yama then tells us an important fact: the Self is the source of all and the dwelling place of all felicity. Now this is most intriguing. We are saying that the Self is all there really is, and then we hear that it is the source of "all." This is the key to true non-dual comprehension. Sri Ramakrishna explained that at first we follow the path of negation saying "Not this, not that," the idea being that everything we can see or think of is not the Real. But when we come to the real end of that approach–which is not just intellection or mind-gaming, but the inner path of meditation–and turn back we will say "ALL this!" That is, we will see that everything is the Real, that the unreal was only our way of seeing and (mis)understanding it. The whole world, said Sri Ramakrishna, will then be seen as "a mart of joy." Unless this is understood at the beginning we will end up being just another dyspeptic world-and-life-denying grouch, claiming that our dryness and grimness is jnana (wisdom). "There is a state beyond bliss, you know," grated one of them to a friend of mine who dared to find joy in the Self. India abounds with these *anatmic* misfits and we have plenty of them in the West, too. (One is too many.)

All that is dwells in–is rooted in–the Self and is therefore an expression of divine Ananda.

[65] Katha Upanishad 1:2:13

What a wonderful world-view: one that sees not “the world” but Spirit. We do not go from one point to another to pass from the unreal to the Real, from darkness to the Light, from death to Immortality. It is only a matter of changing our base of perception. This is the real alchemy, changing the lead of mundane experience to the gold of supernal joy.

The conclusion

No one is excluded from this glorious truth, it extends to all and is vital to all in an equal degree. No one is nearer or farer from the Self–it embraces all. This is the real Gospel–the *Evangelion*, the Good News humanity needs so desperately: “Truly, for thee the gates of joy stand open.”

Let us pass through them!

The Transcendent Reality of the Self

Previously Yama has spoken to Nachiketa of the manner to experience the Self that is immanent in all that "is." Now he completes the picture by an exposition of the Transcendent and the means to realize It. He does this in response to Nachiketa's question: "Teach me, O King, I beseech thee, whatsoever thou knowest to be beyond right and wrong, beyond cause and effect, beyond past, present, and future."[66] He desires to know about the Transcendental Reality that is beyond all qualities or designations. As the Immanent Being, That has infinite names, forms, conditions, and qualities, but beyond that is something much greater: the Transcendent. That can neither be said to exist or not to exist, to be with form or without form, with qualities or without qualities, for all these propositions are dualities, one presupposing the other. Where there is one there is its opposite–duality is an absolute in the realm of the Immanent Reality. Nachiketa is certainly pleased with the truth that all can be seen as the Divine Unity, but he wishes to complete his knowledge by learning about what lies beyond even that. Sri Ma Anandamayi, when discussing these things, always insisted on the point that there is a state in which even the question of duality/unity, form/formless, and such like *cannot even arise*. That is the state Nachiketa aspires to comprehend and experience.

The answer is in the question

Everything in manifestation is dual. This is the truth for every aspect of life. There is an interesting divinatory process known as The Alphabet of the Magi. To "work" it a question is formulated and then written on cards–one letter per card. These cards are then shuffled and dealt out in a special way (unknown to me) to form the words that are the answer to the question! It was The Alphabet of the Magi, worked by a Benedictine monk who practiced divination and astrology in Paris after his monastery had been closed by the anti-religious government, that inspired Charlotte Corday to assassinate Marat and inspired Napoleon, then a mere corporal, to aspire to the rulership of France. So it works.

The idea that the answer is inherent in the question is very important, for it means that the questioner *already knows* the answer on the subconscious (or superconscious) level, that the question cannot arise until the answer is subliminally known. The purpose of questioning, then, is to bring out on the conscious level what is known unconsciously. When we seemingly ask another to teach us we are really seeking to stimulate and bring forth our own knowledge. That is why the wise have assured their students that in time they would be able to find the answers within themselves–it is only a matter of developing intuition through clarifying the mind.

It is very common to hear someone demand: "Why did you ask me if you are not going to accept what I tell you?" The reply should be: "So I can figure the answer our for myself." The very fact that we reject a given answer indicates that we think we do know what is the truth about the matter. Otherwise we would mindlessly accept what we are told. (Many do, alas.) It is all inside us. Questioning reveals the ripening of our innate knowledge. Knowing this, Jesus said: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh

[66] Katha Upanishad 1:2:14

it shall be opened."[67] He is not urging us to seek outside ourselves, but to seek within.

Nachiketa seems to be asking Yama about the Transcendent, but his question reveals how much he already knows.

Beyond right and wrong

The moment we enter duality–relative existence–we become subject to the situation that some thoughts, words, and acts will impel us onward to higher consciousness and others will impel us to lower consciousness. No matter where we may "be" at the moment, it cannot by permanent. By the nature of things we will keep moving up and down, back and forth. Whenever we think we have attained some stability it is only a matter of the movement being so slow it is imperceptible to us. We are always in danger of incurring suffering because of this. In truth, suffering is inevitable, for even rising requires effort and unsureness or doubt as to the success of our endeavor. As Krishna says of us: "Anxiety binds them with a hundred chains."[68] We suffer anxiety as to what is the right or wrong and anxiety as to whether we can avoid the wrong and manage to think and do the right. Even more, we are busy getting and losing, anxious to get the good and rid ourselves of the wrong. And of course we are mostly deluded as to what is really right and wrong, usually thinking that the pleasurable is right and the painful is wrong. That is why Krishna told Arjuna: "Both the good and the pleasant present themselves to men. The wise, having examined both, distinguish the one from the other. The wise prefer the good to the pleasant; the foolish, driven by fleshly desires, prefer the pleasant to the good."[69] The danger is obvious.

Nachiketa intuits that this terrible dragging back and forth, this dilemma inherent in "existence," can come to an end–not in the realm of relative existence, but in its transcendence. Realizing the truth that trying to "rise above" any of the dualities is as foolish as trying to make dry water or cold fire, is a tremendous breakthrough for the developing consciousness and indicates that the end of the search is near. Some of our monks visited a great saint in the Himalayan foothills and spoke with him about spiritual life. He told them: "Your questions show that you are not far from the Goal."

Beyond cause and effect

In ignorant religion "sin" and "righteousness" occupy a great deal of attention, not necessarily because of a sincere desire to be virtuous, but because of their effects. Desire and fear motivate the religionist–at least mentally and emotionally–for sin gets punished and righteousness gets rewarded. Punishment hurts and reward feels good. Punishment takes away and reward supplies. The dispenser of reward and punishment is some kind (or many kinds) of deity who, being an extension of the ignorant egos of the adherents of the religion, judges good and bad on the basis of "I like" and "I don't like," "I want" and "I don't want." Good sense and practicality have nothing to do with it. The deity is either pleased or displeased and acts accordingly. To complicate matters, the deity can be placated if "sinned against" and, being mollified by groveling and penitence, will reward the sinner as much as if he had been virtuous–maybe even more, so the deity's "love" and "mercy" can be revealed. We see this behavior in human beings all the time: tears, apology and self-castigation not only stop the

[67] Matthew 7:7,8

[68] Bhagavad Gita 16:12

[69] Katha Upanishad 1:2:2

anger or displeasure, they evoke a tenderness and openness that should sensibly only be evoked by right conduct. So in evil religion (for ignorance is evil), despite the assurance that virtue is rewarded, we see that sin and repentance are rewarded and the sinner assured of salvation. Such a religion becomes a living hell populated and promoted by living demons.

I expect that just about everyone reading these words are congratulating themselves on having gotten out of or avoided such religion. Ah, the sane wisdom of the East. Really? Do we not see that "good karma" and "bad karma" are bugaboos just as much desired and feared as any heaven or hell proffered by Western religion? I knew a man that had a metaphysical bookstore. Shoplifting was a real problem. Now, if he had put a sign on the door so the departing malefactors would have read something like: "Thou shalt not steal,"[70] or "The soul that sinneth it shall die,"[71] or ""Know thou that God will bring thee into judgment,"[72] it would have had no result–perhaps even the opposite. For after all, were not his customers "beyond all that" Judeo-Christian negativity? Indeed they were! So he did this. He put a sign on the door for all to see as they departed saying: "Shoplifting is Bad Karma." Nearly every day that sign stopped at least one person. Most sheepishly shuffled back to the shelf and sneaked the book back. Some actually came to the owner and gave him the book along with an apology. Why? Had he evoked their higher moral sensibilities? Not a bit. They had traded fear of sin and hell for fear of bad karma and retribution–maybe even a bad rebirth. The ego was still in the driver's seat, and quite liable to stay there for a long time. Karma may be more "scientific" a concept than sin, punishment, and hell, but the fear engendered is just as egoic, and therefore just as negative and ultimately ignorant.

Nachiketa had a clear vision of things. The problem was not tears or smiles, but the LAW of cause and effect, the truth that for every action there is an equal responsive reaction. Reactivity, inner and outer, is also inherent in relative–dual–consciousness. But Nachiketa did not just want to get away from the noise and damp of the ocean of samsara, he wanted to get away from the ocean itself. A jail cell may be miserable or luxurious, but it is still a prison. Nachiketa aspired to freedom. He wished to attain that which was beyond cause and effect, not just a means of avoiding them. This is one of the reasons why religion is usually so pointless: it attempts to make the fire stop burning rather than showing the way out of the conflagration. It seeks to make bondage palatable, pleasing to both the egocentric deity and the egocentric devotee. A confederacy of dunces, indeed.

Beyond past, present, and future

My first reading of the Bhagavad Gita revealed to me something I had intuited all my life: the fundamental truth that space and time are utter illusions, basic delusions of human consciousness. What a relief! So when in three or four days I heard one of the most intelligent of my university professors remark that time and space were the two fundamental realities, you can imagine how much I appreciated the Gita for clearing that nonsense up for me. (I appreciated myself, too, for being so clever as to understand it.)

The time-space continuum is a torment to the awakened consciousness, for it is the basis for the existence of cause and effect and therefore of right and wrong. It is impermanence itself, the root cause of all suffering, fear, anxiety, and instability. Since we have been immersed

[70] Exodus 20:15

[71] Ezekiel 18:4,20

[72] Ecclesiastes 11:9

in relativity for creation cycles beyond number, we find ourselves in a present whose vast roots are thoroughly unknown, and whose effects will create an unknown future that will be a fusion of the past and the "present present." Uncertainty and confusion are the results of even a small attempt to make sense of the whole thing. And the idea of controlling any aspect is simply beyond our imagination. We are drowning in a shoreless ocean. But we do not just drown once and have it over with. We drown daily–every moment, actually. Only the stupid or the willfully ignorant do not see this. How can we blame those who take refuge in illusion, whatever the form? They do not need an analysis or judgment of their predicament; they need a way out. Nachiketa is asking for that, not for more philosophy or exposition of the problem.

Transcendent being

There is not a "place" beyond right and wrong, beyond cause and effect, beyond past, present, and future, but *a state of being* that transcends them. Nachiketa sought to become an altogether different order of being, to enter into the state of Brahman Itself. Knowing this to be so, Yama does not hesitate, but literally spells it out. He begins:

"Of that goal which all the Vedas declare, which is implicit in all penances, and in pursuit of which men lead lives of continence and service, of that will I briefly speak."[73]

Goal

That which Nachiketa seeks is not an abstraction but a positive reality known to Yama. Perhaps the most heartening thing that can be said about That Which Is is the fact that it is The Goal. Its attainment is not only possible, it is inevitable. The entire field of relative existence, however much we have damaged or corrupted it, and it in turn has damaged or corrupted us, has a single purpose: the attainment of Brahman and the consequent liberation of the questing spirit (atman). This is what everything is all about. So no wonder we have made such a mess of things–literally. Not knowing either their or our purpose, what else could be the result? We are like the character in the Woody Allen movie that tried to play the cello by blowing through the holes. Ignorance is the root of all the trouble.

"Shake off this fever of ignorance. Stop hoping for worldly rewards. Fix your mind on the Atman. Be free from the sense of ego,"[74] counsels Krishna. "You dream you are the doer, you dream that action is done, you dream that action bears fruit. It is your ignorance, it is the world's delusion that gives you these dreams."[75] "Seek this knowledge and comprehend clearly why you should seek it: such, it is said, are the roots of true wisdom: ignorance, merely, is all that denies them."[76] "When men have thrown off their ignorance, they are free from pride and delusion. They have conquered the evil of worldly attachment. They live in constant union with the Atman. All craving has left them. They are no longer at the mercy of opposing sense-reactions. Thus they reach that state which is beyond all change."[77]

Vedas

By "vedas" Yama means the teachings of illumined sages regarding the nature of Brahman

[73] Katha Upanishad 1:2:15

[74] Bhagavad Gita 3:30

[75] Bhagavad Gita 5:14

[76] Bhagavad Gita 13:11

[77] Bhagavad Gita 15:5

and the way to conscious union with Brahman. For "veda" means knowledge or wisdom. Although that word has come to be used only in the sense of the ancient Sanskrit hymns found in the Rig, Sama, Yajur, and Atharva Vedas, they are not meant here. At the time of Nachiketa the vedas were the orally transmitted wisdom of the Vedic Rishis that only later were written down as the upanishads.[78] In a broader sense, the vedas are the words of any enlightened person about the nature of God and the realization of God. Books of speculative philosophy mean nothing to our search for Divine Consciousness. Only the teachings of those who have themselves reached the Goal are relevant and worthy of our attention.

Implicit in all penances

The word rather poorly translated here as "penances" is tapasya. Literally it means the generation of heat or energy, but is always used in a symbolic manner, referring to spiritual practice and its effect, especially the roasting of karmic seeds, the burning up of karma. Tapasya means a practical–i.e., result-producing–spiritual discipline which culminates in spiritual evolution and enlightenment.

The important idea in Yama's words are that our spiritual practice must be congruent with the nature of God. Though tapasya implies a discipline, it cannot just be some type of militaristic coercion or "mortification" of the body and mind that are often nothing more than a expression of self-loathing. The religions of the world abound in admiration for those who torture the body and mind, attaining abnormal psychic states foolishly mistaken for spiritual attainment. But according to Yama, the Goal must be implicit in all disciplines. That is, the disciplines themselves must embody the nature of God–and our own selves, as well. A person unfamiliar with spiritual truth should be able through analysis of authentic practice to actually come to understand the truth regarding the nature of both the seeker and the Goal. If a spiritual practice cannot impart this knowledge by its very mechanics, then it is invalid and cannot possibly lead to the Goal. For this is a very valuable fact: only that practice which from the very first moment puts us in touch with God and begins to reveal our true nature is genuine yoga. All else is illusion. That is why Krishna says: "What is man's will and how shall he use it? Let him put forth its power to uncover the Atman, not hide the Atman: man's will is the only friend of the Atman: his will is also the Atman's enemy."[79] The plain truth is that putting the force of the will into erroneous practices will hide the Truth from us even more, whereas applying the will in correct practice will reveal Divinity to us. For Divinity is inherent in true yoga.

In pursuit of which...

The upanishads teach us the truth of the unity of the atman and Brahman. Therefore that truth is known as advaita, "not two," meaning that there is no separation of the atman and Brahman at any time. Simplistic thinkers, especially in the West, immediately begin to decry the idea of tapasya, yoga, or any other discipline, insisting very shrilly that there is no need for

[78] Upanishads: Books (of varying lengths) of the philosophical teachings of the ancient sages of India on the knowledge of Absolute Reality. The upanishads contain two major themes: (1) the individual self (atman) and the Supreme Self (Paramatman) are one in essence, and (2) the goal of life is the realization/manifestation of this unity, the realization of God (Brahman). There are eleven principal upanishads: Isha, Kena, Katha, Prashna, Mundaka, Mandukya, Taittiriya, Aitaryeya, Chandogya, Brihadaranyaka, and Svetashvatara, all of which were commented on by Shankara, thus setting the seal of authenticity on them.

[79] Bhagavad Gita 6:5

such, that to engage in spiritual practice is to affirm a delusion of separation between us and God. They usually end up denying that either we or God even exist, advocating a kind of petulant, bullying nihilism, reminding any sensible person of Krishna's indictment: "These malignant creatures are full of egoism, vanity, lust, wrath, and consciousness of power. They loathe me, and deny my presence both in themselves and in others. They are enemies of all men and of myself."[80] Drastic words, these, but they address a drastic mental and spiritual aberration. Read the entire sixteenth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita for a full outline of such kinds of people. This is but one of the reasons why a continual study of the Gita is necessary for those who do not wish to go (or be led) astray in their spiritual pursuit. No student of the Gita could ever fall into such absurd pitfalls as these "advaitans" whose only unity is their absorption in the illusion of the ego.

The truth is that the realization of God not only can but must be pursued. We do not pursue God, understand, for God is everywhere and always one with us. Rather, we pursue the revelation of that eternal oneness and its manifestation on all levels of our present existence. Regarding this, a yogi-adept of the twentieth century, Dr. I. K. Taimni,[81] remarked in his book *The Science of Yoga*: "According to the yogic philosophy it is possible to rise completely above the illusions and miseries of life and to gain infinite knowledge, bliss, and power through enlightenment *here and now* while we are still living in the physical body. And if we do not attain this enlightenment while we are still alive we will have to come back again and again into this world until we have accomplished this appointed task. So it is not a question of choosing the path of yoga or rejecting it. It is a question of choosing it now or in some future life. It is a question of gaining enlightenment as soon as possible and avoiding the suffering in the future or postponing the effort and going through further suffering which is unnecessary and avoidable. This is the meaning of Yoga Sutra 2:16: 'The misery which is not yet come can and is to be avoided.' No vague promise of an uncertain postmortem happiness this, but a definite scientific assertion of a fact verified by the experience of innumerable yogis, saints, and sages who have trodden the path of yoga throughout the ages."

It is absolutely sure: "Seek, and ye shall find."

Brahmacharya

Brahmacharyam is the word Swami Prabhavananda translates as "lives of continence and service." Radhakrishnan renders it "the life of a religious student," and Swami Sivananda: "life of a brahmacharin." In India the first stage of life is that of a student, a brahmachari. The brahmachari-student leads a life of discipline, the core of which is sexual continence–a concept utterly lacking in other cultures as their present disintegration reveals. He also serves his teacher in a practical way, for the ideal environment of the brahmacharya ashram is rural, a forest setting being the ideal. At the time the upanishads were first spoken, all Aryas lived in the forests, living an agrarian life of the utmost simplicity. The students of a teacher helped out in the day-to-day routine required by such a lifestyle.

But Yama is not confining brahmacharya to the student's stage of life, and in "modern times," whatever the age or outer circumstances of the seeker, it would consist of both self

[80] Bhagavad Gita 16:18

[81] Dr. I. K. Taimni was a professor of chemistry in India. He wrote many excellent books on philosophy and spiritual practice, including *The Science of Yoga*, a commentary on the Yoga Sutras. For many years he was the spiritual head of the Esoteric Section of the Theosphical Society headquartered in Adyar, Madras (Tamilnadu), and traveled the world without publicity or notoriety, quietly instructing many sincere aspirants in the path to Supreme Consciousness.

control (abstinence) and practical positive action, including selfless service.

I once saw a cartoon in which a drunk was lying in a gutter and asking a Salvation Army woman: "Can you save me here, or do I have to go somewhere?" Obviously, being "saved" did not interest him very much. But those who are truly interested say with the Prodigal Son: "I will arise and go."[82] And they do. Living a life of purity and discipline is the way they rise and go.

Briefly speak.

It is most significant that Yama says he will briefly speak of the Goal. Why is this? Because the Goal is Brahman, and Brahman can only be spoken of very briefly. This is because Brahman is exceedingly simple, in fact the only really simple (incomplex) "thing" there is. Also, the intellect can only grasp the tiniest bit of the truth about Brahman, so not only can little be said, little can be understood. In a way this makes it very easy for us. Here is how the Gita teaches us about Brahman:

"Now I shall describe That which has to be known, in order that its knower may gain immortality. That Brahman is beginningless, transcendent, eternal. He is said to be equally beyond what is, and what is not."[83] "Light of all lights, He abides beyond our ignorant darkness; Knowledge, the one thing real we may study or know, the heart's dweller."[84]

But Nachiketa does not want to know *about* Brahman, he wants to *know* Brahman. With this in mind, Yama reveals both Brahman and the way to Brahman–for they are the same–by saying:

"It is–OM."[85]

You cannot be briefer than that. Nor do you need to be. Yama has said it all, for Om is the embodiment of The All.

He has, as I say, said it all, but Yama continues with a brief exposition of the nature of Om.

Om is Supreme Brahman

"This syllable is Brahman. This syllable is indeed supreme. He who knows it obtains his desire."[86]

Om is Brahman. It is not a symbol of Brahman, It IS Brahman. Om is not even a word–It is the very presence of Brahman. "Om is not counted among words,"[87] said Sri Ramakrishna. "It is not a word, it is God Himself,"[88] said Swami Vivekananda. This assertion is borne out by the fact that in Sanskrit Om is not treated as a word–that is, It does not go through any changes in form according to its grammatical position or status. It has no plural, possessive, subjective, objective, or adjectival forms. It is always just "Om" and nothing else.

I could cite a great many authoritative statement affirming the divine nature of Om, but

[82] Luke 15:18

[83] Bhagavad Gita 13:12

[84] Bhagavad Gita 13:17

[85] *Om ityetat.* Katha Upanishad 1:2:15

[86] Katha Upanishad 1:2:16

[87] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, Majumdar translation: 3.17.3.

[88] Swami Vivekananda, *Inspired Talks*, Sunday, July 21

they all come from the upanishads, which we will be considering in time, so the repetition could become tedious. For now I recommend our publication, *The Glories and Powers of Om,* which contains under many headings the scriptural statements on Om.

Obviously Om is supreme, being Itself the Supreme. But Yama has made this seemingly obvious comment to convey the fact that Om is the supreme means to the realization of the Supreme. There is nothing higher than Om, nor is there any means of spiritual cultivation higher than Om. That is why Patanjali simply said: "Its repetition and meditation is *the way*."[89]

Yama then tells Nachiketa that he who knows Om obtains whatever he desires. Many upanishads state that Om encompasses all existence and therefore literally *is* all things, that all things are formed of Om just as all clay pots are made of the single substance, clay. Since all things are contained in Om, it can only follow that he who truly *knows* Om by uniting his consciousness with It through Its japa and meditation shall attain all that he desires as a matter of course. Such a wise one, will of course desire only That which fulfills all desire: Brahman. Commenting on this very verse, Swami Vivekananda said: "Ay, therefore first know the secret of this Om, *that you are the Om*...."[90] Om is the ending of all desire by being the fulfillment of all desire.

The strongest and the highest

"It is the strongest support. It is the highest symbol. He who knows it is reverenced as a knower of Brahman."[91] The need for security is fundamental to human existence. This is especially true in relation to spiritual life. Even a little observation reveals how incredibly fragile spiritual consciousness and spiritual activity is in human life, for everything militates against it and overwhelms it. Observing this, Jesus' disciples asked him: "Lord, are there few that be saved?" And he assured them that indeed few manage to be saved.[92] The New Testament Greek word translated "saved" is *sodzo*, which means to be safe in the sense of delivered from danger or harm. It also means to be healed and become whole. Salvation in the view of Jesus and his disciples was not having sins forgiven and allowed into heaven, but was the same as the upanishadic sages: Liberation (Moksha). All shall eventually attain liberation, but only a few at a time do so. Not because it is so difficult, but that so few even conceive of it, and even fewer persevere in the pursuit of it. Jesus quoted the Gita in his discourses and was certainly familiar with Krishna's words to Arjuna: "Who cares to seek for that perfect freedom? One man, perhaps, in many thousands. Then tell me how many of those who seek freedom shall know the total truth of my being? Perhaps one only."[93]

With this perspective, Yama tells Nachiketa that Om is the strongest and highest support. Swami Pabhavananda translated *alambana* the second time as "symbol" no doubt thinking of Om as an object of meditation. Although its supporting power is most important in relation to spiritual life and practice, Yama makes no such explicit qualification, so we can be sure that Om is the empowerment and support of everything positive in our life. This, too, is asserted many times in the upanishads.

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[89] Yoga Sutras 1:28

[90] *The Vedanta*

[91] Katha Upanishad 1:2:17

[92] See Luke 13:23,24; Matthew 7:14; 19:25; 20:16; 22:14

[93] Bhagavad Gita 7:3

Knower of Om–knower of Brahman.

"He who knows It is reverenced as a knower of Brahman." Some translators render this: "He who knows It is revered in the world of Brahman." For a knower of Om is translated into that world, having been transmuted into Brahman through Om. It is no wonder, then, that the Mundaka Upanishad says about Om: "Dismiss other utterances. This is the bridge to immortality."[94]

Om is our self (atman)

How can Om have such an incredible effect upon us? Because we *are* Om. It is our own self (atman).

"The Self, whose symbol is OM, is the omniscient Lord. He is not born. He does not die. He is neither cause nor effect. This Ancient One is unborn, imperishable, eternal: though the body be destroyed, he is not killed."[95]

If Brahman was not at the core of our being, *as* the core of our being, we could not possibly become one with Brahman. All talk of "becoming" is of course not really accurate if we think of it as becoming something we are not. Rather, it is the becoming aware of, becoming established in, our eternal unity with Brahman. Some years ago, workers in a Burmese temple were moving a huge plaster image of Buddha with heavy equipment. Something went wrong and the image was dropped. To their astonishment the plaster, which was only a layer a few inches thick, broke and fell off, revealing that the image was solid gold! Centuries before it had been covered with plaster to protect it from thieves. Today it is considered the single most valuable image of Buddha in the world. We are like that. A layer of relative existence has been plastered onto our consciousness for so long that we think we are the plaster. When the plaster was broken the image was revealed to be gold, and when our "plaster" is broken we shall be revealed as parts of Brahman, waves of the One Ocean of Being.

We shall then know that we are not born, we do not die, we are neither cause nor effect; we are unborn, imperishable, eternal, unaffected by any conditions of the body whatsoever. For as Shankara sang:

I am not the mind, intellect, thought, or ego;
Not hearing, not tasting, not smelling, not seeing;
I am not the elements–ether, earth, fire, air:
I am the form of Conscious Bliss: I am Spirit!

I am neither Prana, nor the five vital airs;
Nor the seven components of the gross body;
Nor the subtle bodies; nor organs of action:
I am the form of Conscious Bliss: I am Spirit!

I have no aversion, clinging, greed, delusion;
No envy or pride, and no duty or purpose;
I have no desire, and I have no freedom:

[94] Mundaka Upanishad 2.2.5

[95] Katha Upanishad 1:2:18

I am the form of Conscious Bliss: I am Spirit!

I have no merit or sin, nor pleasure or pain;
No mantra, pilgrimage, Veda or sacrifice;
Not enjoying, enjoyable, or enjoyer:
I am the form of Conscious Bliss: I am Spirit!

I have no death or fear, no distinction of caste;
Neither father, nor mother, nor do I have birth;
No friend or relation, guru or disciple:
I am the form of Conscious Bliss: I am Spirit!

I am without attributes; I am without form;
I am all-pervading, I am omnipresent;
By senses untouched, neither free, nor knowable:
I am the form of Conscious Bliss: I am Spirit!

We do not really need to *become* immortal and eternal, for we are that already. Instead we need to get beyond the illusory consciousness of birth and death, cause and effect, and the entire range of relative existence. The japa and meditation of Om is the Way.

The Immortal Self

Yama has just told Nachiketa that "though the body be destroyed, he [the Self] is not killed." Then he continues: "If the slayer think that he slays, if the slain think that he is slain, neither of them knows the truth. The Self slays not, nor is he slain."[96] Before considering this upanishadic passage, here is what the Bhagavad Gita, the great digest of the upanishads, has to say about this:

"Bodies are said to die, but That which possesses the body is eternal. It cannot be limited, or destroyed....Some say this Atman is slain, and others call It the slayer: they know nothing. How can It slay or who shall slay It? Know this Atman unborn, undying, never ceasing, never beginning, deathless, birthless, unchanging for ever. How can It die the death of the body? Knowing It birthless, knowing It deathless, knowing It endless, for ever unchanging, dream not you do the deed of the killer...."[97]

Dreaming–that is the key. God is dreaming the entire drama of the cosmos, but he knows it and controls the dream. We, too, are dreaming the drama of our life, so Krishna tells us: "You dream you are the doer, you dream that action is done, you dream that action bears fruit. It is your ignorance, it is the world's delusion that gives you these dreams."[98] The richest people in the world, if they dream they are penniless, suffer the frustration and fear of poverty just as keenly as do those who really are paupers. When they awake, the mental pain disperses, but it was no less real.

This is something we often miss when we subscribe to the theory of Maya. The experiences, such as birth, death, and disease, may be illusion, but the suffering they produce is not. It is real. The grief we feel at the death of a loved one is real, even if the death is not. That is why the *Sankhya Karika*, the basic text of the Sankhya philosophy upon which the Yoga philosophy is based, opens with a discussion of suffering as our problem. Certainly, illusion should be dispelled, but that will not take care of the deeper problem: our capacity for suffering. It is foolish and callous to bully those who suffer by expounding on the unreality of that to which they are reacting. For there is no thing or situation which can make us suffer. Suffering is our *reaction* to those things. When we reach the state where we no longer react–for pleasure is as destructive as pain–then we will be free.

Patanjali's dictum that yoga is the cessation of modifications of the chitta does not refer at all to restless thoughts in the superficial mind. He is speaking of the capacity for any kind of reactivity to outer stimuli. It is when we are unreacting and resting in our true self that we are in the *state* of Yoga. To merely fiddle around with the shallow thinking mind, believing that calming it makes us yogis, is deluding ourselves. Our problem is far, far greater and deeper than jittery thoughts. It is the capacity for suffering and for being deluded. To be awake in the fullest sense is to be incapable of sleep and dream. (I am speaking metaphysically.) All the philosophy and analysis in the world will not help us. We need to awaken forever. That is what real yoga is all about.

Slayer and slain are roles in the dream-drama of the evolving consciousness. If we know–not

[96] Katha Upanishad 1:2:19

[97] Bhagavad Gita 2:18-21

[98] Bhagavad Gita 5:14

just suppose or believe–this, then nothing can move us from the state of peace that is a quality of our true self. Fortunately for us all, the cliche about “There is naught but thinking makes it so,” is bunkum, another Western “truth” that mercifully is false.

The body can be slain and can be a slayer. Being part of the dream, it really acts and is acted upon in the dream context. The dreamer, however is not part of the dream, even when it projects an image of itself into the dream and slays or is slain. Nothing external can affect or change the internal reality. Again, awakening is the only solution, and we should accept nothing less. Any view other than this which Yama presents to Nachiketa is but the blind leading the blind.

A great flaw in the thinking of most of us is only accepting half of this great truth. We easily affirm our immortality, saying: “I can never die,” and thus reject the idea that we can be slain. Yet we accept the concept that we can be slayers, and make a great to-do about “sin” and “karma.” Is not that so? Because we want to control the behavior of others by promising rewards and threatening punishments, we have literally bought into this delusion and traded on if for life after life, fooling even ourselves. Though we find the truth in the upanishads or the Gita, we still keep on worrying about purifying ourselves and clearing out our karma. Half-deluded, we stumble on, distracting ourselves from the real goal, sinking deeper into the morass. Consider the lives of saints. So many of them have been great sinners, even murderers, or incredibly ignorant, and yet we see them either instantly entering into the state of holiness or rocketing to it in a short time. The reason is simple: they had never committed a sin in their eternal lives. Like David, they awoke and found themselves with God.[99]

We need only do the same.

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[99] “When I awake, I am still with thee.” (Psalms 139:18)

The Indwelling Self

"Smaller than the smallest, greater than the greatest, this Self forever dwells within the hearts of all. When a man is free from desire, his mind and senses purified, he beholds the glory of the Self and is without sorrow."[100] So Yama now tells Nachiketa.

Smaller than the smallest, greater than the greatest

We tend to think of infinity as boundlessly large, when in actuality that which is infinite transcends space and can therefore not be measured in any manner. It cannot be small or large. Which is why there is no thing too small or to great for God to be involved with. The Self, being a part of God, is likewise beyond measurement. It is neither small nor large, gross nor subtle. In fact, the Self is simply beyond description. We can only talk around it, not really express its mystery.

This Self forever dwells within the hearts of all

However, there are some things that can be said about the presence of the Self, therefore Yama does tell Nachiketa that "this Self forever dwells within the hearts of all."

The Self is eternal. It has no beginning and it can never have an end. Whatever it is, it has been forever. What it is not, it shall never be. We say this glibly, but usually do not believe, and rarely manifest it. Nevertheless, it is bedrock truth.

The Self, being beyond time and space, cannot possibly be anywhere. Yet we readily say that it is within. This is as close to the truth about the Self as we can get. At the core of all things, having itself neither periphery or core, is the unchanging Self. It "dwells" in the sense that it abides, yet the Self does not at all "exist" in the way we understand existence, which is completely relative. The Self is absolute, and relativity can never affect or touch it.

The Self abides in the hearts of all. But what is the "heart"? *Guha* means both cave and heart, but it also means to be "in a secret place." Within the inmost heart of all things is that which transcends even "inmost." That is the Self. And there is no thing whatsoever that does not have the Self as its eternal, unchanging indweller. The Self can be within all as their essential being only if the Self *is* all. This is the Great Revelation. All that we see around us is resting upon the Self as the substratum. All that we "see" objectively is Maya, illusion. That which we cannot see, but which we can "be" is the Self, the all-pervading subject.

This all sounds wonderful, but what possible meaning can it have if we do not experience this glorious truth for ourselves? Nothing, obviously. So Yama proceeds to tell Nachiketa how the Self can be realized.

When a man is free from desire

To be truly free from desire is to be *incapable* of desire. To not be desiring anything at the moment is not what is spoken of here. We mistakenly think that if we can become indifferent to all things and want nothing we will be free from desire. But we will still be in the condition where desire is possible–even if it be in the future–or even a future life.

To desire something we have to feel inadequate, but even more fundamentally, we have to

[100] Katha Upanishad 1:2:20

have objective consciousness and a belief in the reality of the objects perceived, and a belief that in some way we can enter into relation with those objects, that we can affect them and they can affect us. What a heap of delusions! Desire is only a symptom of profound ignorance and delusion. In itself it is no more the problem than red blotches on the skin are the disease we call measles. (See? We even name a disease as the symptoms.) However, true desirelessness–and that is what Yama is speaking about–is the state of the liberated, those who know the Self.

His mind and senses purified

A few years ago a valuable book was published by the Sri Ramakrishna Math in Madras: a translation of the *Sankhya Karika* by Swami Virupakshananda. In the Publisher's Note we find this: "Vedanta takes off to ethereal heights only from the granite platform provided by Sankhya....Not only Vedanta, but also modern science, cannot be understood in all their nuances without a firm grasp of the Sankhyan tenets." And the translator writes: "Of all the philosophical systems, the Sankhya philosophy is considered to be the most ancient school of thought. Sankhya philosophy maintains a prominent place in all the shastras.... In the Mahabharata it is said that there is no knowledge such as Sankhya and no power like that of Yoga. [On which Sankhya is based.] We should have no doubt as to Sankhya being the highest knowledge. (Shantiparva 316-2)." Later he outlines how the Sankhya philosophy is presented in the Chandogya, Katha, and Svetasvatara upanishads particularly. And: "In the Mahabharata and Puranas we find the Sankhya Philosophy fully explained." The second chapter of the Bhagavad Gita (part of the Mahabharata) is entitled *Sankhya Yoga*, and in five verses (2:39; 3:3; 5:5; 18:13, 19) Krishna mentions Sankhya by name as the truth he is expounding.

I mention this because it is so common for students to approach the upanishads as exponents of the simplistic monism that is erroneously thought to be Advaita. With this distorted frame of reference the upanishadic teachings that are very obviously opposed to their opinion are ignored. But we cannot afford the luxury of wilful ignorance. Simply babbling that "It is all one" and "We are already there" accomplishes absolutely nothing. And besides, it is not true–in the simplistic sense they mean.

God, the Primal Purusha, is eternally associated with Prakriti (Pradhana) on the macrocosmic level, and continually projects and withdraws it as the ever-evolving creation. In the same way each individual purusha is eternally associated with prakriti on the microcosmic level and engages in a series of incarnations, evolving the personal prakriti to the point where it becomes a perfect mirror of the individual purusha and there is a practical separation between the two, just as on the cosmic level. Let us not forget: Patanjali defines yoga (liberation) as a condition of the chitta–of our personal prakriti–not a simple intellectual insight or "realization."

The essence is this: Each one of us is evolving our own prakriti, just as God is evolving the universe. The difference is that God is not caught in the drama, and we are. Sankhya states that we must learn to separate our consciousness from its enmeshment in prakriti, but that is only the preparation. Then we must engage in the process of bringing our prakriti to a state of perfection in which it no longer produces waves, but becomes a permanently quiescent reflection of purusha–of our true Self, which Buddhism calls our Original Face.

That process is Yoga, and Yama has this in mind when he speaks of the seeker having "his mind and senses purified." Merely reading a few books and hearing a few lectures on the nature of the Self will not do it. We must focus our attention on/in the energy fields we call

"mind" and "senses" and completely repolarize and reconstruct them. "Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind,"[101] wrote Saint Paul. Patanjali speaks of the process of kriya yoga, the yoga of purification, consisting of austerity (tapasya), self-study, and devoting the life to God.[102] Yama, Saint Paul, Patanjali, and Krishna all tell us the same thing: "Become a yogi."[103]

He beholds the glory of the Self

The Self cannot be intellectually conceived or spoken about, but it can be *seen*–and thereby fully known–by the purified consciousness. And it is seen within the core of our being, within the cave of the heart. Caves are important symbols. Though they are to be found everywhere, we naturally think of yogis as dwelling in caves. Which they do, metaphorically. In the Gospels we see that Christ (Consciousness) is born in a cave and resurrects in a cave. It all takes place in the heart. Wherefore the wise Solomon said: "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life."[104] The practice of yoga (mediation) is the keeping of the heart which transforms the yogi's life.

It is said that Shiva sits immersed in samadhi, but occasionally awakens, arises, and dances in ecstasy, exclaiming over and over: "O! Who I am! Who I am!" The same wonder at the glory of the Self will be experienced by the persevering yogi.

And is without sorrow

How could there be sorrow or any slightest form of suffering or discontent for those who behold that glory and realize that they are themselves that glory? It can be said of such a one, as Arjuna said of Krishna: "You know yourself through yourself alone."[105] And as Krishna said of the perfected yogi: "To obey the Atman is his peaceful joy; sorrow melts into that clear peace: his quiet mind is soon established in peace.[106]...Now that he holds it [the knowledge of the Self], he knows this treasure above all others: faith so certain shall never be shaken by heaviest sorrow.[107]...Who knows the Atman knows that happiness born of pure knowledge: the joy of sattwa. Deep his delight after strict self-schooling: sour toil at first but at last what sweetness, the end of sorrow."[108]

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[101] Romans 12:2. "Be renewed in the spirit of your mind" (Ephesians 4:23).

[102] Yoga Sutras 2:1

[103] Bhagavad Gita, 6:46

[104] Proverbs 4:23

[105] Bhagavad Gita 10:15

[106] Bhagavad Gita 2:65

[107] Bhagavad Gita 6:22

[108] Bhagavad Gita 18:37

The Omnipresent Self

"Though seated, he travels far; though at rest, he moves all things. Who but the purest of the pure can realize this Effulgent Being, who is joy and who is beyond joy."[109]

Yama continues instructing Nachiketa on the nature of the Self. Being a highly developed being, Nachiketa had doubtless intuited most of this already, but for us who were raised in the dry gulch of the West and its "religions" his words are profoundly stirring–astounding, actually. Who could believe that in this chaotic world there were ever–and still are–sages who by direct experience have seen and spoken these truths? We should analyze them carefully, not for mere philosophical exactitude, but for a good, joyful revel in knowing the facts at last.

Unmoving, he moves

Being rooted in Infinity and thereby beyond space, the Self can never "go" anywhere. When we speak of the atma descending into relative existence or coming into matter, we are only describing the mayic experience that is itself nothing more than a training movie. If we see a motion picture about Europe, we do not think we have actually been there–yet, we did see Europe. In the same way, under the spell of Maya we have all kinds of experiences, yet they are mere appearance only. "Appearance," however is real, even if insubstantial. So we both are and are not here. I experience writing this, and you experience reading it. That is real. But the environment in which we live, including our bodies, is but the picture projected onto the formless screen of consciousness that is our Self.

So, going nowhere, the Self "goes" everywhere. Being no thing, the Self "becomes" all things. Doing nothing, the Self "does" everything. This is the way of it.

Unmoved, he is the mover

Nothing affects the Self, but the Self affects all situations and things. Sankhya philosophy postulates that although Prakriti never touches the Purusha, it is the proximity of the Purusha that causes Prakriti to move and manifest in manifold ways. In the West we find the expressions "uncaused Cause" and "unmoved Mover." These apply to the individual Self as much as to God.

There is a very practical application of this fact. Being under the spell of Maya we think: "All this is happening to me. All this is being done to me." But that is erroneous. *We* are making it all happen, we are "doing" it to ourselves. There are no victims. Everything proceeds from us. Consequently we can study our lives and determine what is going on in our inner mind (which is not the Self, either). Our lives and environment are mirror images, revealing our states of mind. Our life is an exercise in consciousness. There are computer games in which the images on the screen are actually manipulated by the player's mind and will. That is but a feeble glimpse of the truth about our entire chain of births and deaths. That is also what karma is. "You dream you are the doer, you dream that action is done, you dream that action bears fruit. It is your ignorance, it is the world's delusion that gives you these dreams."[110]

[109] Katha Upanishad 1:2:21

[110] Bhagavad Gita 5:14

Who can know him?

We have a terrible conditioning. We believe that all knowledge must come from outside ourselves, that we are blanks that need to be written on. In contemporary America this is very marked. Everybody thinks they need to have classes or lessons on everything. Some years back a friend of our ashram pointed this out about horse-riding. She commented that everyone she knew took horse-riding lessons, in contrast to her children who just got up on a horse and rode. The she commented: "Everyone thinks they have to be taught to do anything, rather than learning on their own by experience."

This spills over into our philosophical life, too. We think we are dummies that have to have every nuance, every subtle point, taught to us–and even worse, that they all have to be embodied in technical terms. It is only sensible to inquire about these things from those with more experience and knowledge than ourselves, but childish dependence is no wisdom at all. Dr. Spock began one of his books my telling new mothers that they knew much more about caring for babies than they thought they did, and to trust their inner feelings on the matter. This caused quite a stir. I was only a child at the time, and yet the ripples of consternation even reached me through a magazine review of his "revolutionary" book. We have no confidence, and spiritual laziness often compounds the problem.

For some reason Swami Prabhavanandaji gives us this translation: "Who but the purest of the pure can realize this Effulgent Being." That is so lofty, so noble, that frankly it paralyzes our aspiration completely. "I am not 'the purest of the pure,' so how can I know the Self? I will have to ask others to give me hints about it." But that is very mistaken. The actual upanishadic question is: "Who else but myself can know that radiant one [devam]," the Self? This is not just an inspiring thought, it is perfect good sense. *Being* the Self, who else but I can *know* my Self? Others may *see* the divine in me, but I alone can *know* the divine in me.

In the Chandogya Upanishad we have the thrilling story of Uddalaka instructing Svetaketu on the nature of the Self, saying to him over and over: "Thou art That." But however stirring that account may be, Uddalaka is only telling him *about* the Self. It is up to Svetaketu to *know* the Self. Someone can bring us strawberries, show them to us, and even put them in our mouths, but we alone can know their taste–no one can taste them for us. In the same way, millions may tell us about our Self, but we alone can really know It. It begins and ends with us. Self-knowledge is the most natural thing for us all. We are working very hard to produce and maintain the unnatural state of not knowing the Self. Once we get sensible and literally "wise up" things will change.

Joy and beyond

The self is "this Effulgent Being, who is joy and who is beyond joy." We are ourselves devas–gods. There is no happiness or joy anywhere but in ourselves, for we are not happy or joyful by nature, we ARE happiness and joy. The idea is that joy is the permanent, eternal, condition of our true Self. The word translated "joy" in this verse is *mada*, which means delight, intoxication, and exhilaration. To delight in our Self is the ultimate enjoyment. In the last essay I mentioned that it is said that Shiva sits immersed in samadhi, but occasionally awakens, arises, and dances in ecstasy, exclaiming over and over: "O! Who I am! Who I am!" This is delight in the self.

Yet, Yama says that the Self "rejoices and rejoices not." He is trying to convey that the delight in the Self is not delight in an object, but is totally subjective and inward-turned. This

is very important, for as the yogi develops through his sadhana, his prakriti-nature begins to reflect his inner joy more and more, and he can start delighting in the delight-reflection rather than in the real thing, and come to the conclusion that he has already attained the state Yama is speaking about. This is the state of *shuddhasattwa*, of extreme purity of the chitta, the mind-substance of the yogi. If he is not careful, he will mistake the mirror image for his true "face" and believe he has attained what still lies before him. Innumerable are the yogis who have been deluded in this way and become trapped in the subtlest reaches of Maya. That is why Lord Krishna said: "How hard to break through is this, my Maya, made of the gunas!"[111] For to delight in the mere picture of the joy that is the Self is to still be trapped in objective, outward-turned consciousness. As Krishna further tells us: "Only that yogi whose joy is inward, inward his peace, and his vision inward shall come to Brahman and know nirvana.[112]

How do we avoid mistaking the image for the reality? By continuing to practice meditation and other spiritual disciplines until the moment the body drops off! *A sure sign of a deluded individual is the belief that he has gone beyond the need for meditation and other spiritual practices.* "Baba no longer needs to meditate." "Baba has transcended these things long ago." "Baba is always in That, so such things are unnecessary for him." (You can put "Ma" in place of "Baba" if need be.) But what about Sahaja Nirvikalpa Samadhi? Yes. What about it?

A very famous Indian guru of the twentieth century believed that he had attained sahaja nirvikalpa samadhi, so he announced that he no longer needed to meditate, since there was nothing more it could do for him. While his disciples meditated, he stayed in his room and fiddled around with this and that. After some years he was visited by two Americans who thought of themselves as big guns on the American spiritual scene. Not wanting to scandalize them by messing about while everyone else in the ashram meditated, Sahaja Nirvikalpa Samadhi Baba started attending the meditation sessions and meditating also. After a few days he remarked in wonder to a group of disciples that he could perceive a very marked improvement in his mind and consciousness since starting to meditate daily, and expressed wonder and puzzlement over how that could be. Unfortunately, no one had either the good sense or the courage to tell him, so when the American biggies left, SNSB went back to fooling around in his room during the meditation periods.

Consider the perfect life of Gautama Buddha. To the last moment of his life he lived like a normal monk. He was eighty years of age, yet he went forth and begged for his food every day–no one brought specially-prepared goodies for him. He lived outdoors, under a tree, not in a special "retreat" designed by a renowned architect-disciple. He dressed in the simple, minimal clothing of a monk, not in some expensive rigs donated by disciples to express their "devotion." He walked everywhere he went. He did not ride in some cart or chariot provided by a rich patron out of consideration for his age. And here is the most important point of all: He meditated for hours a day, even withdrawing for weeks and months at a time to engage in even more intense meditation. He never relaxed his disciplines for an hour, much less a day. In this way he showed us how to not fall into delusion: keep on till the end, until the Self is truly known. And then keep on until death says: The End.

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[111] Bhagavad Gita 7:14

[112] Bhagavad Gita 5:24

The Sorrowless Self

"Formless is he, though inhabiting form. In the midst of the fleeting he abides forever. All-pervading and supreme is the Self. The wise man, knowing him in his true nature, transcends all grief.[113]

Yama continues to instruct us regarding the nature of the Self, using the most simple words yet with the most profound meanings.

Formless is he, though inhabiting form

Ashariram sharireshu–the bodiless within bodies–such is the Self. Though ever without a "body" or adjunct in any form (as far as its true nature is concerned), yet all bodies are inhabited by the Self. There is no form in which the Self, the Formless, does not dwell. Who can number the forms in which we have manifested from the beginning of our evolutionary peregrinations in relativity, yet we have slipped away from each embodiment as bodiless as we were from the first. Being one with Brahman, it can be said of the Self as well as of Brahman:

> Everywhere are His hands, eyes, feet; His heads and His faces:
> This whole world is His ear; He exists, encompassing all things;
> Doing the tasks of each sense, yet Himself devoid of the senses:
> Standing apart, He sustains: He is free from the gunas but feels them.
> He is within and without: He lives in the live and the lifeless:
> Subtle beyond mind's grasp; so near us, so utterly distant:
> Undivided, He seems to divide into objects and creatures;
> Sending creation forth from Himself, He upholds and withdraws it;
> Light of all lights, He abides beyond our ignorant darkness;
> Knowledge, the one thing real we may study or know, the heart's dweller.[114]

In the midst of the fleeting he abides forever

Anavastheshv' avasthitam–the stable among the unstable, the unchanging among the ever-changing–so is the Self. For aeons we are entertained with the ever-shifting kaleidoscope of Maya's web. Finally we are no longer entertained by it, but wearied. Yet we find ourselves addicted to it. Only in the beginning do addicts love their addiction. In time they come to loathe it, yet refuse to even hear of ridding themselves of it. And then at last they see themselves as slaves, hating their bondage but incapable of shedding it. Yet we are ever free.

People bound by various addictions, including alcohol and drugs, would come to Sri Ramakrishna and plead for help. Often he would just touch them, and their enslavement would be gone forever. Learning of this, we naturally glorify Sri Ramakrishna for his power of merciful deliverance, but we must not overlook the great truth it demonstrates: *It was the nature of those people to be free.* Otherwise he could not have freed them.

If we would seek freedom, then, we must seek it only in the Self. And the Self being within, we must seek within. For "Without meditation, where is peace? Without peace, where

[113] Katha Upanishad 1:2:22

[114] Bhagavad Gita 13:13-17

is happiness?”[115]

All-pervading

Time and space being mirages, the Self is everywhere. Infinity is not “bigness” so big it cannot be calculated, it is beyond measuring because it transcends the modes of measurable being. It is simply another mode of existence altogether. The truth is, the atman, like the Paramatman is omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. (This latter is easy, since the Self never “does” anything.) So there is no place where the Self is not present. It goes everywhere without moving.

Supreme

The Self is supreme, but not in the sense of earthly entities. It is all-embracing. Not only is there nothing above it, there is nothing beneath it, for such states are not native–and therefore impossible–to it. But Maya is doing a superb job at convincing us otherwise and fooling us into thinking that the purpose of both material life and sadhana is to expand in the illusory realms of conditioned existence, to become large or small, to enter in or depart–none of which are even possible for the Self.

Simply hearing about the Self can make us more ignorant than we were before if we interpret the Self in terms of samsaric delusion.

The wise

The wise are those who know the Self as it is. And that they have accomplished by shedding their association with the unreal and turning back to their own reality.

Transcend all grief

They transcend all grief by removing their center of awareness from the realm in which suffering is possible. Suffering being an illusion, they need only awaken from the dream and abide in the Real. This is not a negative state, for it is not just a removal of sorrow, but the entering into the bliss that is the nature of the Self.

“Well done, thou good and faithful servant: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.”[116]

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[115] Bhagavad Gita 2:66

[116] Matthew 25:21

Who Can Know the Self?

The sense of nonsense

I once read a long and rather tedious essay on Shakespeare's policy of putting discomfiting truths into the mouths of fools so people could scorn them and not get upset with him for unmasking their folly. It often happens that what people hope is "just fun" or "nonsense" is really insightful commentary on their foibles. The happens very often in poetry, for everybody knows we need not take poetry seriously.

Edward Lear, who protected himself by first claiming that he wrote "nonsense verse," made some profound observations on life. Some of his limericks have a lot to say about how life should be lived. One of his wisest works was a poem entitled "The Jumblies," in which he tells us at the end of every verse:

Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumblies live;
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,
And they went to sea in a Sieve.

These exotic people, went to sea in a sieve. Everyone else said they would drown, considering that a sieve is more holes than anything else. Some even told them that though they might manage, it would be a wrong thing to do. But they did it anyway–excellently and to great profit. Upon their return, all the nay-sayers announced that they, too would go to sea in a sieve. But Lear assures us still that "Far and few, far and few, are the lands where the Jumblies live." No; everyone will not be going to sea in a sieve. Just the far and few Jumblies.

The requirements

Perhaps Lear, as he wrote the poem, thought of the following from the Gospel of Saint Luke: "Then said one unto him, Lord, are there few that be saved? And he said unto them, Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able."[117] This is not a statement of pessimism, but of simple fact. All manage in time, but in dribbles.

Yama has been very encouraging in his exposition of the Self, but now having told of its wonder he enters upon the subject of what is required to know the Self. Actually, the "price" he presents to us is quite simple and direct. If we are interested, then the price is substantial but not impossible. If we are only window-shoppers, then the price seems unreasonable and beyond payment. Here it is in two verses:

"The Self is not known through study of the scriptures, nor through subtlety of the intellect, nor through much learning; but by him who longs for him is he known.' Verily unto him does the Self reveal his true being."

"By learning, a man cannot know him, if he desist not from evil, if he control not his senses, if he quiet not his mind, and practice not meditation."[118]

[117] Luke 13:23,24

[118] Katha Upanishad 1:2:23, 24

Not through study of the scriptures

I was fortunate some years back to live near an ideal Brahmin scholar, a professor of mathematics at a university. Together we formed a Hindu Parishad to help Indian residents stay focused on Sanatana Dharma while living in the West. At our first meeting several of us spoke. In his discourse, Sri Dwivedi spoke of the nature of true dharma as a way of life and not a system of abstract concepts. In contrast, the other religions of the world are all "people of The Book." Their entire identity is taken up with following a Book and professing its teachings. As a consequence, he pointed out, they can all "dialogue" with even the Marxists, for they, too, are people of a Book. But what can they say to real dharma, which cannot be gotten out of a book? See how vast are the sacred writings of Sanatana Dharma, yet we know that they are of limited value once true wisdom is gained.

Reading the Bhagavad Gita opened to me a world I had never thought could exist. How many wonderful things I found therein! Many were amazing, not the least being the statement: "When the whole country is flooded, the reservoir becomes superfluous. So, to the illumined seer, the Vedas are all superfluous."[119] Here was a scripture that told me I should go beyond it and know for myself–and showed me the way to do that! Sri Ramakrishna often used the simile of a letter. Once you read it and know what it says, what more need do you have for it?

The self cannot be known through scriptural study, for Krishna tells us that "he who even wishes to know of yoga transcends the Vedic rites."[120] Books are nothing more than paper and ink. Obsession with them is detrimental, proving the truth of the statement that: "the letter kills, but the spirit gives life."[121] We must get behind the words of even illumined masters and tap the Source of those words.

Sri Ramakrishna frequently pointed out that almanacs predict rainfall, but you cannot get a drop by squeezing them, however hard. In the same way, intense study of scriptures cannot give a drop of spiritual life, for no book can reveal That which lies beyond all we think or know.[122]

Not through subtlety of the intellect

We cannot possibly figure out the nature of anything, much less the Self, by mere intellection. This is not the fault of the mind, any more than it is the fault of a blender that you cannot get television programs through it. There is absolutely no faculty which can perceive or reveal the Self. The Self alone knows Itself. As long as we attempt to perceive the Self through any intermediary, just so long shall we be frustrated–or worse, deluded. There is no instrument, however subtle, no capacity of the mind, however refined, that can reveal the Self. Yet, the purified intellect (buddhi) can intuit the presence of the Self and even some of its traits, and this is good, but this is not Self-knowledge. Many intelligent people with highly developed intellects mistake this intuition for direct experience and knowledge. This is a subtle trap we must avoid diligently. How could we know if we have fallen into the trap rather than risen into the Light? That, actually is easy to determine. *If we can talk about what we perceive, and define*

[119] Bhagavad Gita 2:46

[120] Bhagavad Gita 6:44

[121] II Corinthians 3:6

[122] "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8, 9)

it, then it is not the Self, but only our approximation. That which lies within the range of speech lies outside the Self. No matter how near we can come to the Self, it is not the same as knowing the Self. For when the Self is revealed, all "knowing" not only ceases, it becomes impossible.

Intelligence should not be confused with intellectuality. Intelligence is a help to the revelation of the Self, but intellectuality is an insurmountable hindrance. That is why Jesus said to God: "Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes."[123] To demonstrate this vividly, "Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, and said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven."[124] Think how direct and uncomplicated a child's mind usually is. Also, they are capable of intensely magical/mystical thought. How unquestioning they accept the idea of the miraculous, including the power of the individual–including themselves–to work marvels. How sad that they ever come to "know better" in a wrong way. A friend of mine was watching a television program in which a pianist seemed to be floating in the air and even turning over and over. "How do you suppose they do that?" she mused to herself aloud. Instantly her five-year-old said: "Easy! There's a magician hidden in the piano." And that is so true: there is a magical being hidden in each one of us known as the Self which can do–and does–all things.

Not through much learning

Vyasa was the greatest sage of post-Vedic India, codifier of the Vedas, commentator on the Yoga Sutras, author of the Mahabharata (which includes the Bhagavad Gita), and the Brahma Sutras (Vedanta Sutras). Vast as his writings were, hummed up everything that was taught by these holy books, saying:

I shall tell you in half a verse (sloka[125]) what has been written in tens of millions of books:

Brahman is real. The world is unreal. The jiva [individual spirit] is none other than Brahman.

That is it. So when the future Swami Turiyananda told Sri Ramakrishna that he studied Vedanta for several hours a day, the great Master was astonished. Quoting the words of Vyasa, he asked: "How can you spend hours studying something so simple? What more is there to say?" Turiyananda got the idea behind the idea and himself became a knower of the Self.

All the learning in the world is futile in relation to the Self and Brahman, for they lie outside the scope of the intellect. The ear cannot hear color, the eye cannot smell fragrance. No thing can know the Self but the Self.

It can be done

Yama's words of seeming negation are really quite positive, for he then tells Nachiketa: "But by him who longs for him is he known. Verily unto him does the Self reveal his true being."

This is a remarkable statement. There are no tools or gimmicks that can mechanically lead

[123] Matthew 11:25

[124] Matthew 18:2,3

[125] A Sanskrit verse traditionally has four lines.

us to the vision of the Self. Certainly there are methods that aid in our search–that is what yoga is all about. But it is a mistake to think that a technique can be applied like a crowbar to break open the inner treasury and loot the vault. (And this is the attitude of most "seekers.") Methods, such as yoga (meditation), worship, and good deeds are necessary to successfully prosecute our quest for God. Their function is twofold: they prepare us–make us capable–for the attainment of self-knowledge, and they are manifestations–evidence, actually–of the genuineness of our aspiration. By engaging in them we live out our intention.

Ma Anandamayi continually assured people that the desire for the God was the way to God–everything else were aids or expressions, but it is our own divine self-will that accomplishes our liberation. This is very important to understand.

It is commonly said that all religions are valid, that they all led to the same goal. That is true to some degree, but it leaves out the real fact: it is the *seeking* that brings about the *finding.* Frankly, it is the seekers who validate the religions, not the other way around. People finding God in all religions is not a statement about the worth of those religions, but a statement about the worth of those people. Sri Ramakrishna attained God-vision through the various religions he practiced and thereby demonstrated their viability as spiritual paths. But he also revealed that it is the nature of the individual to attain that vision whatever the path that is followed. For without that innate capacity what value would the religions have? The jivatman by its nature can know the Paramatman. As the Psalmist said: "Deep calleth unto deep."[126] Like attracts like; it really does take one to know one.

Swami Prabhavananda notes that an alternate translation can be: "Whom the Self chooses, by him is he attained." In India they have the saying: "He who chooses God has first been chosen by Him." Jesus told his disciples: " Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you."[127] The very fact that we are seeking God is guarantee of our finding, for it is an indication that He has called us. And He does not call in vain. Nor do we seek in vain.[128] "Verily unto him does the Self reveal his true being."

Yet there are obstacles to knowing the Self: "By learning, a man cannot know him, if he desist not from evil, if he control not his senses, if he quiet not his mind, and practice not meditation."[129]

Learning

Yama lists mere intellectual study, the heaping up of extraneous "knowledge" which by its character is external and superficial as an obstacle–not so much in itself, but by the illusion of knowledge that arises in the self-satisfied mind of the "knower." Yama's assertion shows how mistaken it is to translate *swadhyaya* (self-study) as "study of scriptures" when we encounter it in the Yoga Sutras.

The Kena Upanishad examines this matter, saying: "He by whom Brahman is not known, knows It; he by whom It is known, knows It not. It is not known by those who know It; It is known by those who do not know It."[130] Obviously the word "know" has two meanings here. One is the mere intellection about Brahman, the other is knowledge derived from the direct

[126] Psalms 42:7

[127] John 15:16

[128] "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you." (Matthew 7:7)

[129] Katha Upanishad 1:2:24

[130] Kena Upanishad 2:3

experience of Brahman, from conscious union with Brahman. There is a knowing that is unknowing and an unknowing that is knowing. That is why Swami Prabhavananda renders the Kena verse: "He truly knows Brahman who knows him as beyond knowledge; he who thinks that he knows, knows not. The ignorant think that Brahman is known, but the wise know him to be beyond knowledge."

Persisting in evil

Evil in all forms must be abandoned if the Self, which is all good, is to be known. This should not be hard to understand, but many deny it anyway, or try to skirt around it. Of them Jesus said: "They have their reward"[131]–a false security that is really "the sleep of death."[132] But for us who wish to live it is important to determine what is good and what is evil, what is right and what is wrong.

Sanatana Dharma has a concept of right and wrong unique among the world religions. The others teach that something is right or wrong because their God or Prophet has said so in their infallible scriptures. "It is in the Bible," "It is in the ZendAvesta," "It is in the Koran," etc. Although the scriptures of Hindu Dharma do mention things as being good or evil, the basis for the statements are utterly different from that of other religions.

Sanatana Dharma does not look upon a thing as wrong because God or gods have declared it wrong or some lawgiver has prohibited it. And the same in relation to the things that are right. Rather, a thing is good or evil according to its innate character. Many times people tried to get Mata Anandamayi to approve or disapprove of something. But she would simply say: "If it takes you toward the Goal it is good. If it takes you away from the Goal it is evil." That which darkens, obscures, or limits our consciousness is bad. That which lights, clears, and expands our consciousness is good. That which helps in the search for God is good; that which hinders or delays it is not.

We all know people who declare that their addictions and illusions either do not hurt them or even are good for them. Very well; they have their reward. But the intelligent do not engage in such childish rationalization. They impartially examine and conclude accordingly. It is all a matter of the individual's interest and honesty. In other words, it is all in our hands–as are all the aspects of our life if we face up to it. Sanatana Dharma does not list "bads" and "goods" because it assumes that those who wish to pursue dharma can judge for themselves. Though we can certainly determine whether the Vedic scriptures consider something harmful or helpful, we should look upon the list as neither exhaustive or even binding. Sanatana Dharma is Manava Dharma–*human* dharma. And human beings use their intelligent reason. Sanatana Dharma also leaves every one free to be wise or foolish. Dharma never condemns or praises. It just waits to be fulfilled.

Lack of sense control

The senses must be controlled, but we usually mistake the way to do so. The upanishads use the simile of horses pulling a chariot, and we mistake that, too, thinking it a symbol of incredible forces to be overcome. But we need not think of it so drastically. Before you control a horse, you tame it. So before we control the senses we "tame" them through purification. Sadhana is the only way. Meditation alone purifies in a lasting manner. At the same time we

131 Matthew 6:2,5,16

132 Psalms 13:3

purify the senses by directing them Godward. We make the eyes look at sacred symbols or depictions, the ears to hear the words of sacred texts and sacred music, the nose to smell the offered incense, the tongue to taste the offered sweets or food, and the inner sense of touch to feel the exalted atmosphere created by worship and contact with the holy. Pilgrimage is valuable because it is a "total sense" experience of holiness. The good news is that we need not struggle with the senses, but turn them in spiritual directions.

Restlessness of mind

Restlessness of mind is itself great suffering. Yama says that a quiet mind is indispensable to self-knowledge. Here is what Krishna has to say about it:

"If a yogi has perfect control over his mind, and struggles continually in this way to unite himself with Brahman, he will come at last to the crowning peace of Nirvana, the peace that is in me."[133]

"When can a man be said to have achieved union with Brahman? When his mind is under perfect control and freed from all desires, so that he becomes absorbed in the Atman, and nothing else. "The light of a lamp does not flicker in a windless place": that is the simile which describes a yogi of one-pointed mind, who meditates upon the Atman. When, through the practice of yoga, the mind ceases its restless movements, and becomes still, he realizes the Atman. It satisfies him entirely. Then he knows that infinite happiness which can be realized by the purified heart but is beyond the grasp of the senses. He stands firm in this realization. Because of it, he can never again wander from the inmost truth of his being."[134]

Can I say more than that?

Without meditation

"Without meditation, where is peace? Without peace, where is happiness?"[135]

The *sine qua non* of self-knowledge is meditation. The Self is ever-present but we do not perceive it because our vision is obscured by the illusion known as Maya. After describing the method of meditation, Krishna says: "If he practices meditation in this manner, his heart will become pure"[136] and the Self will become literally self-evident. In conclusion he remarks: "Make a habit of practicing meditation, and do not let your mind be distracted. In this way you will come finally to the Lord, who is the light-giver, the highest of the high."[137]

The formula

The Self can be known by those who truly desire to know. And that true desire manifests through desisting from evil, controlling of the senses, quieting (restraining) the mind, and practicing meditation. This is the *real* Formula For Success.

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[133] Bhagavad Gita 6:15

[134] Bhagavad Gita 6:18-21

[135] Bhagavad Gita 2:66

[136] Bhagavad Gita 6:12

[137] Bhagavad Gita 8:8

The All-Consuming Self

Somewhere along the line–perhaps when they stopped killing their own people for sacrificial victims and committing genocide for the glory of their gods–the religion of Westerners lost its vigor. "Spiritual" came to be equated with the insubstantial and ethereal, degenerating in time into an airy and vaporous sentimentalism of the sickliest character. Languishing in love for God became an ideal along with nobly bearing the terrible burdens God threw onto a groaning and groveling humanity. The keynote of all this was passivity, and not a passivity born of true courage or nobility, but from a crushing sense of impotence and hopelessness. Hell became exalted to heaven, and the contempt of a capricious and tyrannical God became Divine Love, a love that demanded placation and acceptance-obedience. This God of love hated a lot more things than he liked and basically tolerated nothing. His religion in time became just like him, and so did many of his devotees–in attitude and deed. Since he was the ideal Father, they began treating their children just as he did his. Contemporary Western society is the result. Even the rebellion against this madness is as hateful, ignorant, and repressive as that which is being supposedly rejected. Only the pious cover is discarded; the evil core flourishes. The utter insubstantiality of the "spirituel" has become a logical doorway to denial of any spiritual reality.

In the East (India) things are fundamentally different, even if some of the sillier ways of Western religion are also to be found there, particularly in the "bhakti movement." The concept of the Self as identified with the Supreme Self rather than a creation whose tenuous existence is continually threatened by the possibility of divine wrath, has produced a psychology and a society the reverse of that found in the West. The Self is as eternal and immovable as God–because it is one with God. Always.

In the nineteenth century the remarkable poet, author, and mystic Emily Bronte became exposed to the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita while studying in Belgium. She had long before instinctually rejected the ignorant religion of her childhood, but now she had an intelligent basis for her rejection. Fortunately it took the form of affirmation rather than negation. She had seen clearly when nine or so that she and all her sisters (and brother) would die young of the same disease (tuberculosis), and had written a poem about it. When death was only a matter of weeks away, she wrote this final poem:

No coward soul is mine,
No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere:
I see Heaven's glories shine,
And Faith shines equal, arming me from Fear.

O God within my breast,
Almighty, ever-present Deity!
Life, that in me has rest,
As I, undying Life, have power in Thee!

Vain are the thousand creeds

That move men's hearts: unutterably vain;
Worthless as withered weeds,
Or idlest froth amid the boundless main,

To waken doubt in one
Holding so fast by Thy infinity,
So surely anchored on
The steadfast rock of Immortality.

With wide-embracing love
Thy Spirit animates eternal years,
Pervades and broods above,
Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates, and rears.

Though earth and moon were gone,
And suns and universes ceased to be,
And Thou wert left alone,
Every existence would exist in Thee.

There is not room for Death,
Nor atom that his might could render void:
Thou–thou art Being and Breath,
And what thou art may never be destroyed.

Yama's analysis of the Self has had a very logical progression. Then he tosses out to Nachiketa a single incredible sentence: "To him Brahmins and Kshatriyas are but food, and death itself a condiment."[138]

All that we consider worthy of respect, either venerable (brahmin) or powerful (kshatriya), is but a snack to the everlasting Self. Even death, which is ever with us and seemingly rules our destiny, is but a flavoring for the Self at its feast of life, adding spice.

Yama's words are reminiscent of Arjuna's vision of the Universal Self in the eleventh chapter of the Bhagavad Gita. Since the individual atman and the Paramatman are one they have the same qualities. Just as Arjuna saw that all things emanate from the Supreme and are reabsorbed in the Supreme–are "eaten" by It, so it is with the Self. All that is "us" has come from the Self and shall return to the Self. The Self is the eternal immortal source of that which we think is temporal and perishable. But only the forms are such. Their essence is the Self.

Unborn, the Self moves through many births. Formless, the Self inhabits many forms. Untouched, the Self encounters a myriad objects. Unconditioned, the Self manifests countless qualities. Remaining what it is, the Self appears to be all that it is not. All that it encounters is but its repast, and its births and deaths merely a sauce.

"Licking with your burning tongues, devouring all the worlds, you probe the heights of heaven!"[139]

[138] Katha Upanishad 1:2:25

[139] Bhagavd Gita 11:30

The Divine Indwellers

"Both the individual self and the Universal Self have entered the cave of the heart, the abode of the Most High, but the knowers of Brahman and the householders who perform the fire sacrifices see a difference between them as between sunshine and shadow."[140]

The two selves

There are two selves–the many individual selves and the one Universal Self. The Mundaka Upanishad likens them to two birds of the same appearance who sit in the same tree.[141] First we come to know the individual self, and that enables us to attain the knowledge of the All-inclusive Self. How the two exist as one yet two is incomprehensible to the intellect but is readily experienced by the inmost consciousness of the persevering yogi. Yet intellectually we need to have some grasp of the unity/duality, otherwise we can have no correct perspective on anything, inner or outer. Extreme dualism is an error, and "monism" of any kind is even worse in its "simplisticism." For this reason the enlightened use the expression Non-Dual (advaita) as the nearest we can come to conveying the truth of our existence. The verse beginning *Purnamadah purnamidam* is usually interpreted as a statement that the Relative has come from the Transcendent while retaining essential unity with the Transcendent. But it can also be understood as referring to the individual Self that exists rooted in the Universal Self. It, the atman, originates in the Supreme Self, the Paramatman, and is never separate from that Self. If examined, the two will be seen to be one. How is it possible? The One alone knows–and those who have united their consciousness with the One through yoga.

The cave of the heart

It is easy to see that the individual Self abides in–and as–the heart (hridaya), but when we look at the vast manifestation of Cosmic Life we call "creation" it is natural for our awareness to be drawn outward and thereby forget that the Supreme Self is right there inside in the same space (akasha). The Paramatman is not in the cave of our heart only incidentally, since It is everywhere, but that is Its *abode*, its "native place," Its center. Its manifestation can be found everywhere, but *It* can be found only in the cave of the heart.

> Only that yogi
> Whose joy is inward,
> Inward his peace,
> And his vision inward
> Shall come to Brahman
> And know Nirvana.[142]
>
> Great is that yogi who seeks to be with Brahman,

[140] Katha Upanishad 1:3:1

[141] "Like two birds of golden plumage, inseparable companions, the individual self and the immortal Self are perched on the branches of the selfsame tree. The former tastes of the sweet and bitter fruits of the tree; the latter, tasting of neither, calmly observes." (Mundaka Upanishad 3.1.1)

[142] Bhagavad Gita 5:24

Greater than those who mortify the body,
Greater than the learned,
Greater than the doers of good works:
Therefore, Arjuna, become a yogi.[143]

How foolish to climb mountains, delve into the earth, wander across the plains, or cross the seas, thinking to find the Abode of God–which is the heart alone.

The two knowers

There are those who know Brahman directly and those who possess a secondary knowledge based on intuition resulting from their seeking of Brahman. Though only the first really know Brahman, yet the others' "knowing about" Brahman is of such a character that it can lead them on to the direct knowledge of the illumined. Both of these have the same understanding without contradiction. Therefore the Finders never disdain the Seekers.

The difference

What do the Finders and Seekers know? That the atman and the Paramatman, though one, are as different as sunshine and shadow. But not in the sense of being opposite or antithetical to one another. Rather, it means that the individual Self exists only because the Supreme Self exists, just as a shadow can only exist because of the light. As the Rig Veda says of the Supreme Self: "His shadow is immortality." Also, the idea is that the individual self (jivatman) is a reflection of the Supreme Self (Paramatman). Later, Yama will say: "He shining, everything shines."[144]

The aspiration

Since the foregoing is true, the next verse of the upanishad says: "May we perform the Nachiketa Sacrifice, which bridges the world of suffering. May we know the imperishable Brahman, who is fearless, and who is the end and refuge of those who seek liberation."[145]

What is the Nachiketa Sacrifice? It is not a secret fire ritual that produces a magical enlightenment. The Nachiketa Sacrifice is the determined search for knowledge (jnana) which stops not until the Goal is reached. That is this the correct understanding is demonstrated by the results desired by the sacrificer: the knowledge of Brahman.

The search for union with God is the bridge which we cross to be free from this world of suffering. Seeking God is itself the guarantee that we shall find Him. Many who lack confidence worry as to whether they can succeed in spiritual life, if they are "ready," and so forth. But the very fact that they wish to find God means that they have already travelled far along the path in previous lives. Otherwise they would sleep along with most of the world. "For the man who has once asked the way to Brahman goes further than any mere fulfiller of the Vedic rituals."[146] "The scriptures declare that merit can be acquired by studying the Vedas, performing ritualistic sacrifices, practising austerities and giving alms. But the yogi who has understood this teaching of mine will gain more than any who do these things. He will reach that universal source,

[143] Bhagavad Gita 6:46

[144] Katha Upanishad 2:2:15

[145] Katha Upanishad 1:3:2

[146] Bhagavad Gita 6:44

which is the uttermost abode of God."[147]

Truly, "May we know the imperishable Brahman, who is fearless, and who is the end and refuge of those who seek liberation."

[147] Bhagavad Gita 8:28

The Chariot

Perhaps the most perfect simile of our condition as human beings as we meander through the labyrinth of continual birth and death is that given in the Katha Upanishad, and it is worthy of careful analysis.

"Know that the Self is the rider, and the body the chariot; that the intellect is the charioteer, and the mind the reins."[148] The first idea set forth in this verse is the completely inactive role of the individual Self (atman). The other "ingredients" in the list are actively involved in "living" but the atman is absolutely beyond any activity, and is merely the observer. This is because its nature is pure consciousness–and nothing else.

Body-chariot

The body is the chariot, a conglomerate of parts without any consciousness or will of its own. (Did anyone else "out there" grow up hearing certain fundamentalists say: "I don't sin but my body sins"?) Yet, being pervaded by the intellect (buddhi) it does seem to have "a mind of its own." It does not, but it is an extension-expression of the mind and as such has great relevance to the spiritual aspirant. Sri Ramakrishna used to study the physical configuration of newcomers and thereby determine their spiritual qualifications. So we must think of the body as an inert thing. It is alive, but alive through the indwelling spirit. We may not be the body, but the body is certainly an expression of ourself. The body is not only the vehicle of our accumulated karmas it is the embodiment of them. Our karmas are incarnated in the body much more than is the Self.

Intellect-charioteer

"The intellect is the charioteer." Our movement through "life" is solely through the agency of the intellect, the buddhi. This is why Krishna speaks of Buddhi Yoga as the process of liberation. Yoga is solely under the supervision of the buddhi. Yoga takes place both through the buddhi and within the buddhi. This gives us a tremendous insight into the nature of liberation: it is totally a matter of intellect, of reconstruction of awareness. The wise certainly undertake many external, even physical, disciplines to assist in their practice of yoga, but all of these are intended to affect the buddhi in its striving towards enlightenment. Since the buddhi is the charioteer, its quality determines everything in life. The cultivation of our buddhi, then, must be the focus of our sadhana. Any humanimal can be taught asanas and pranayama,[149] but only the developed human can engage in real yoga. If you think this previous statement is extreme let me tell you something I learned early on in my "yoga life."

In 1962 I was privileged to meet and listen to the venerable A. B. Purani, the administrator of the renowned Aurobindo Ashram. Sri Purani had been a fellow revolutionary with the (future) great Master Sri Aurobindo Ghosh (who, incidentally, was a high school teacher and inspirer of Paramhansa Yogananda). Later he became his disciple and lived in the ashram for many years before the master's passing.

[148] Katha Upanishad 1:3:3

[149] By "pranayama" I mean only the physical breathing exercises of Hatha Yoga, not the subtle practices of Raja Yoga–that is a different matter altogether.

During one of his brilliant discourses at the East-West Cultural Center in Hollywood, Sri Purani told of an experience he had while travelling to the United States. He had stopped over in Japan where he was invited to speak to a yoga group in Tokyo. This group taught and practiced only Hatha Yoga (asanas and pranayama). At the conclusion of his talk, Sri Purani asked them: "Would you agree that the greatest yogis of recent times were Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Aurobindo, and Sri Ramana Maharshi?" They expressed unanimous assent to this statement. "Yet," he pointed out, "not one of them practiced Hatha Yoga. So why do you consider yourselves yogis when you only practice that which they never bothered with?"

No matter how many external assists we may use, yoga is essentially of the buddhi alone.

Mind-reins

"And the mind the reins." By mind (manah) is meant the sensory mind, the intermediary between the intellect and the body–and the entire world, as well. Through the mind the intellect sees whether the body should act or be still. For example, the mind conveys the sensation of a hand burning to the intellect, which then directs the body–again, through the mind–to pull the hand away from the fire and plunge it in cold water or some such remedy.

The next element in the matter are the senses, without which the mind would have nothing to show the intellect. Therefore:

Sense-horses

"The senses, say the wise, are the horses; the roads they travel are the mazes of desire."[150]

It is the senses that drag the chariot of the body along according to their impulses. If the buddhi is weak or underdeveloped, the mind which is driven by pain-pleasure motivation alone takes complete charge in giving "full rein" to the senses. Having no intelligence they plunge onward, ever seeking fulfillment and, not finding it, hurtling even further on the paths of unreason and folly. For "the roads they travel are the mazes of desire" rather than intelligence. As a consequence the individual becomes hopelessly lost and mired in the morass of external sensation. Enslavement to body and senses is the only possible consequence–death in life and ultimately death in "actuality"–of the body and senses.

Self-definition

"Who am I?" is the gate to real understanding, for it sets us seeking true knowledge. And the upanishadic verse continues: "The wise call the Self the enjoyer when he is united with the body, the senses, and the mind." We certainly do not enjoy a great deal of our experiences in/through the body, so perhaps a better translation of bhokta is "experiencer" rather than enjoyer.

The major idea in this verse is that the Self is the actionless consciousness that experiences the intellect, mind, senses, and body. As a consequence we can understand that the Self is never "the doer" at any time. The Gita illumines this for us, saying: "Every action is really performed by the gunas [sensory energies]. Man, deluded by his egoism, thinks: 'I am the doer.' But he who has the true insight into the operations of the gunas and their various functions, knows that when senses attach themselves to objects, gunas are merely attaching themselves to gunas. Knowing this, he does not become attached to his actions."[151] "You

[150] Katha Upanishad 1:3:4

[151] Bhagavad Gita 3:27,28

dream you are the doer."[152] "Let the wise man know these gunas alone as the doers of every action; let him learn to know That Which is beyond them, also."[153]

There is more material like this, but the sum is: "The truly admirable man controls his senses by the power of his will."[154] This is because: "The senses are said to be higher than the sense-objects. The mind is higher than the senses. The intelligent will is higher than the mind. What is higher than the intelligent will? The Atman Itself."[155]

The practical application

"When a man lacks discrimination and his mind is uncontrolled, his senses are unmanageable, like the restive horses of a charioteer. But when a man has discrimination and his mind is controlled, his senses, like the well-broken horses of a charioteer, lightly obey the rein."[156]

And more:

"He who lacks discrimination, whose mind is unsteady and whose heart is impure, never reaches the goal, but is born again and again. But he who has discrimination, whose mind is steady and whose heart is pure, reaches the goal, and having reached it is born no more. The man who has a sound understanding for charioteer, a controlled mind for reins–he it is that reaches the end of the journey, the supreme abode of Vishnu, the all pervading."[157]

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[152] Bhagavad Gita 5:14

[153] Bhagavad Gita 14:19

[154] Bhagavad Gita 3:7

[155] Bhagavad Gita 3:42

[156] Katha Upanishad 1:3:5,6

[157] Katha Upanishad 1:3:7-9

The Chariot's Journey

The upanishadic seers have just told us that the Self in the body is like a driver in a chariot. Now they set the intended journey before us.

"The senses derive from physical objects, physical objects from mind, mind from intellect, intellect from ego, ego from the unmanifested seed, and the unmanifested seed from Brahman–the Uncaused Cause. Brahman is the end of the journey. Brahman is the supreme goal."[158]

It is the genealogy of perception that is being outlined here, for if we reverse the order of perception we will come to perceive the Source, the Eternal Witness Itself. This verse, then, is a exposition of the chain, or progression of consciousness. According to it, the hierarchy of perception is:

Brahman (Purusha)
Unmanifested seed (Avyaktam)
Ego (Atma Mahan–the Great Self or Mahat Tattwa)
Intellect (Buddhi)
Mind (Manas)
Senses (Indriyas)
Physical objects (Arthas)

The Bhagavad Gita gives a similar but simpler list[159] relating exclusively to the individual (microcosm) rather than the Universal (Macrocosm), but we can translate the foregoing list to relate to us as individual beings (jivas). In that case we get:

The Self
The unmanifested yet out-turned will-energy
The sense of "I am"
The intellect
The mind
The senses
The sense organs.

My list is more literal than that of Swami Prabhavananda. It is not more meritorious when considering the Cosmos, but it is better when looking at the situation of the individual being.

Having descended the ladder, how do we get back up–especially sense we have no memory of how we managed the descent? Luckily for us the yogis of India figured that out for us untold eons ago, and it works as well today as it did then. Meditation is the way of ascent back to awareness of the Self. It is possible to work our way back up the ladder, for the "rungs" are not disparate elements but evolutes or emanations of those above them. If all the rungs, including the senses themselves, were not extensions of the Self, we could not reach back to the Self. This is as true on the microcosmic level as it is on the macrocosmic. Fortunately Brahman has not "fallen" and forgotten Itself, but It, too, withdraws and projects himself as creation–as we do ourselves by coming into manifestation and eventually into physical birth.

[158] Katha Upanishad 1:3:10, 11

[159] "The senses are said to be higher than the sense-objects. The mind is higher than the senses. The intelligent will is higher than the mind. What is higher than the intelligent will? The Atman Itself. "(Bhagavad Gita 3:42)

"As above, so below" has many ramifications.

The destination and how to get there

"Brahman is the end of the journey. Brahman is the supreme goal." But the simple saying counts for little. So the upanishad continues: "This Brahman, this Self, deep-hidden in all beings, is not revealed to all; but to the seers, pure in heart, concentrated in mind–to them is he revealed."[160] Who sees Brahman? The *sukshma-darshibhih*–those who can see the subtle, the inmost Reality.

How, then, can we become seers of the Subtle? By continually developing our capacity for inner perception and simultaneously refining our inner faculties. To do that we must "go inside" in meditation and work with our inner mechanism called the *antahkarana* by the yogis. As the Taittiriya Upanishad says: "Seek to know Brahman by meditation."[161] And: "Om is Brahman. Om is all. He who meditates on Om attains to Brahman."[162]

"Within the lotus of the heart he dwells, where, like the spokes of a wheel in its hub, the nerves meet. Meditate on him as OM. Easily mayest thou cross the sea of darkness."[163]

"The mind may be compared to a firestick, the syllable OM to another. Rub the two sticks together by repeating the sacred syllable and meditating on Brahman, and the flame of knowledge will be kindled in your heart and all impurities will be burnt away."[164] "Let your body be the stick that is rubbed, the sacred syllable OM the stick that is rubbed against it. Thus shall you realize God, who is hidden within the body as fire is hidden within the wood."[165]

Turning back

"The senses of the wise man obey his mind, his mind obeys his intellect, his intellect obeys his ego, and his ego obeys the Self."[166] This, too, is the product/effect of meditation! Meditation is the establishing of order within and without.

Marching orders!

"Arise! Awake! Approach the feet of the master and know THAT."[167]

In point of fact, the text does not say "approach the feet of the master," but *prapya varan*, which means "having attained boons." The idea is to seek and attain kripa–grace. Actually, the scriptures speak of three kinds of kripa: 1) *sadhana kripa*, the grace of self-effort; 2) *guru kripa*, the grace of a teacher, and 3) *divya kripa*, divine grace. This wise will gain all three. But there is no denying that kripa is a requisite for those who, having arisen and awakened, seek Brahman.

The path

[160] Katha Upanishad 1:3:12

[161] Taittiriya Upanishad 3.2.1

[162] Taittiriya Upanishad 1.8.1

[163] Mundaka Upanishad 2.2.6

[164] Kaivalya Upanishad 11

[165] Swetashwatara Upanishad 1:14

[166] Katha Upanishad 1:3:13

[167] Katha Upanishad 1:3:14

The verse continues: "Like the sharp edge of a razor, the sages say, is the path. Narrow it is, and difficult to tread!" Immediately we think of Jesus words: "Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it."[168]

Because popular religion, despite its attempt to entice followers, continually implies or outright states that spiritual life is hard (I grew up with this in fundamentalist Protestantism and found it outrageous), we tend to look at the principles of Sanatana Dharma with a tainted perspective. The upanishad is not telling us in the manner of Western religion how hard it will be to follow the way of life.

The clue to difficulty in spiritual is found in the description of the path as "like the sharp edge of a razor." The idea is that the path is extremely subtle–not arduous. But that makes it all the more difficult, even impossible, for those of coarse minds. This, and this alone, is what makes the path hard to tread.

No spiritual discipline comes near to being as hard as the things human beings commonly do every day to get the things they want. And "want" is the operative word. If we do not want a thing, then any action needed to obtain it will be tedious and "too hard." But if we want it intensely, then no effort is too much or too hard. That is why the thirty-fourth Ode of Solomon says: "There is no hard way where there is a simple heart, nor any barrier where the thoughts are upright. Nor is there any whirlwind in the depth of the illuminated thought. Where one is surrounded on every side by pleasing country, there is nothing divided in him." So the problem is in us, not in the path.

Here, as in the last essay, we see that the solution is to refine our consciousness through meditation. We must also refine our physical and mental bodes through purity of thought and deed and especially purity of diet. The ingesting of animal flesh, alcohol, nicotine and mind-affecting drugs is a frontal attack on spiritual life. It is completely insane for a seeker to engage in such destructive habits (and they *are* addictions).

The subtle Goal

The absolute necessity for refinement of perception through refinement of all the levels of our being is revealed by the nature of the path's goal: "Soundless, formless, intangible, undying, tasteless, odorless, without beginning, without end, eternal, immutable, beyond nature, is the Self. Knowing him as such, one is freed from death."[169]

We must become able to hear Silence, see the Formless, touch the Untouchable, live to the Immortal, taste the Tasteless, perceive the fragrance of the Odorless, and transcend all relative measure, and even relativity itself. Such a state is verily inconceivable to us at the present. But it can be achieved through yoga.

Let us arise, awake, pass from death unto life, and lay hold of Immortality.

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[168] Matthew 7:13, 14

[169] Katha Upanishad 1:3:15

The Glorious Way

The Katha Upanishad is now going to elaborate on the path so we can better understand how to journey upon it.

"The Self-Existent made the senses turn outward. Accordingly, man looks toward what is without, and sees not what is within. Rare is he who, longing for immortality, shuts his eyes to what is without and beholds the Self."[170]

Why?

The first thing this verse teaches us is that the Divine Itself has caused our consciousness to turn outward. This is not the result of any negative force or "fall" on our part. (The fall took place as a wrong response to the outward turn.) What was the purpose of our turning outward? Evolution. We had to enter into relative existence and run the maze of ever-ascending evolution in order to satisfy our innate urge for infinity. (For more on this, see *Ladder of Light*.) Consequently, there is nothing wrong with the senses turning outward; the problem is when the sense become locked in externalizing. The purpose of our entering the field of evolutionary life was for us to experience the many shades of evolving consciousness while never losing awareness of our true nature or identifying with the costumes we constantly donned and put off as the ages progressed. However it may have been intended, the situation has horribly changed, making us blind to inner realities.

Sunk in awareness of seeming mortality, human beings either seek to distract themselves from the terror and pain which arises from their delusion, or they seek some way to attain immortality. Both searches are based on delusion, so they can only fail. We need not become immortal, but must realize our present, eternal immortal nature. Those who shut their eyes–their consciousness–to the false appearances of external existence and turn within discover the truth of their immortality. No longer do they think that the solution is to be found in some external factor, but clearly see that their own Self is the wondrous answer.

The foolish and the wise

"Fools follow the desires of the flesh and fall into the snare of all-encompassing death; but the wise, knowing the Self as eternal, seek not the things that pass away."[171]

In its true state, relative existence is a vast field of life, but when it is overlain with the veneer of our inner delusions, it becomes death to us. That which is meant to expand our consciousness and free us into Infinity becomes a prison, a killer of our soul–and this is all our doing. The world remains what it ever was, but we have lost sight of its nature just as we have become blind to our own Self.

The urge to expansion of consciousness through upward-moving evolution becomes distorted into a myriad desires arising from our false identity with the body and its illusory mortality. "Seize the moment!" is our despairing cry. Seeking to live, we plunge ourselves "into the snare of all-encompassing death."

The wise, who have come to know their immortality through the direct experience produced

[170] Katha Upanishad 2:1:1

[171] Katha Upanishad 2:1:2

(only) by meditation, turn from the snare and seek only that which cannot pass away because it has never come into being at some point in time, but is immortal–like us. In other words, we seek the kingdom of God that is nothing less than God–and our own Self.

There is a seeking that is necessary, but a seeking for deepening consciousness rather than for something that is not already ours. We must not fall into the facile illusion that we have nothing to do or attain. Certainly there is nothing objective to be done or attained, but in the subjective realm of Consciousness there is literally Everything to be sought and attained. "Strive without ceasing to know the Atman, seek this knowledge and comprehend clearly why you should seek it: such, it is said, are the roots of true wisdom."[172]

[172] Bhagavad Gita 13:11

To Know The Self

Defining the Self

Recently I read of a yogi who was asked, "What is the Self?" The yogi answered: "The one who knows the mind." How simple! And the answer to the query, "Who/What is God?" is equally simple: The one who enables the Self to know the mind and Who knows the Self as its Self.

"He through whom man sees, tastes, smells, hears, feels, and enjoys, is the omniscient Lord."[173] All the doors of perception function through the Divine Presence, not just the Divine Power. Our consciousness is the Consciousness of God, the finite drawn from the Infinite, as the wave draws its existence from the ocean. It is a grave error to decry the experience of our senses as either illusory or somehow degrading. It is our response to sensory experience that is often illusory or degrading. But we are at every moment living in and by God.

But God is not just the Power by which "we live, and move, and have our being."[174] "He, verily, is the immortal Self. Knowing him, one knows all things."[175] He is the all-embracing Consciousness within our consciousness and within all things. If we come to know–enter into the being of–that Infinite One we shall know with His knowing, and therefore know all things. As Saint Paul said: "Now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known."[176] This is the inmost meaning of Saint John's statement: "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is."[177]

"He through whom man experiences the sleeping or waking states is the all-pervading Self. Knowing him, one grieves no more."[178] All states of consciousness are directly rooted in the Self, individual and universal. When through yoga this is truly known, all grief ceases, for the yogi identifies with his all-perceiving Self.

He transcends fear as well, for "He who knows that the individual soul, enjoyer of the fruits of action, is the Self–ever present within, lord of time, past and future–casts out all fear. For this Self is the immortal Self."[179] What an incredible statement! We are thinking that we are poor, mortal beings swept along by forces alien to us and totally beyond our control, when all the time we are the masters of past and future. All our fear comes from our unawareness of this glorious fact. By turning inward and discovering the truth of ourself we will pass beyond fear. The message of the upanishads is inseparably bound up with the necessity for sadhana if it is not to be no more than dead words on a dead page.

Seeing truly

"He who sees the First-Born—born of the mind of Brahma, born before the creation of

[173] Katha Upanishad 2:1:3a

[174] Act 17:28

[175] Katha Upanishad 2:1:3b

[176] I Corinthians 13:12

[177] I John 3:2

[178] Katha Upanishad 2:1:4

[179] Katha Upanishad 2:1:5

waters–and sees him inhabiting the lotus of the heart, living among physical elements, sees Brahman indeed. For this First-Born is the immortal Self."[180] The only way to "see true" is to see The True.

When we turn within, to the core of our being, there we will not only find the individual self, the jiva or atman, but we will find its origin, the Supreme Self, the Paramatman, the eternal Brahman. This is the true vision of God–that in which the two are seen to be One, although their distinction is eternal. The word "born" is misleading, for the Self is never born. There does come a time when it becomes manifest in relative creation, but it existed before that "birth." It is not even right to say that God is our "origin," for the Self is co-eternal with God. As Krishna told Arjuna: "There was never a time when I did not exist, nor you, nor any of these kings. Nor is there any future in which we shall cease to be."[181]

The all-embracing Self

It is no news to us that God not only is within all things but in an ineffable way IS all things. But there is a further fact: We, too, embrace all the levels of being on the finite level, just as does God on the infinite level. So the upanishads further says: "That being who is the power of all powers, and is born as such, who embodies himself in the elements and in them exists, and who has entered the lotus of the heart, is the immortal Self."[182] Again, this refers to both the finite and the Infinite spirits.

Therefore we see that in the vision of the upanishadic sages we are not abstract spirits with no connection whatever with the energies of prakriti. Rather, as with God, those energies are our own expanded and "frozen" energies that in time are to be revealed as consciousness and assimilated into our Self–from which they have never really been separate. Everything is consciousness. In the final sense there is no matter or energy at all. Yet, at the moment we find ourselves in the seemingly manifold condition that is necessary for our evolution and ultimate freedom.

We not only mistake our own nature, we mistake the nature of God as well. We are ourselves "the power of all powers," having willingly embodied ourselves in subtle and gross matter while still living essentially in "the lotus of the heart." How then can we consider ourselves the servants or slaves of any being–including God? There is no "work of God" in this world for us to do–only *our* work, the ascension to perfect freedom. There is a theism that is bondage and a theism that is freedom. We must discriminate between the two.

The source

Because it fits better with the foregoing, let us skip a verse and read: "That in which the sun rises and in which it sets, that which is the source of all the powers of nature and of the senses, that which nothing can transcend–that is the immortal Self."[183]

The Self and the Supreme Self are both the Chidakasha, the Sky or Ether of Consciousness in which the sun of manifested life rises and sets. The waking, dreaming, and deep sleep states take place within the consciousness that is the Self. The experience of birth and death likewise take place within the Self.

[180] Katha Upanishad 2:1:6

[181] Bhagavad Gita 2:12

[182] Katha Upanishad 2:1:7

[183] Katha Upanishad 2:1:9

The Self is, like the Supreme Self, the source of the energies that manifest as the various levels of the subtle and gross bodies which we are presently evolving until they manifest as the spirit-self. Nothing is ever destroyed, but is resolved back into its origin, the spirit. This is the great and awesome assertion of the upanishads.

Nothing is beyond or higher than the Self–not even God, for God and the Self are essentially one, as are the ocean and the waves. As long as we dream of separation, so long will we continue to come and go, suffering the pain and fear of continual change. But when we awaken into Unity, all sorrow and fear cease forever.

The Power of Enlightenment

"Agni, the all-seeing, who lies hidden in fire sticks, like a child well guarded in the womb, who is worshiped day by day by awakened souls, and by those who offer oblations in sacrificial fire–he is the immortal Self."[184]

According to the researches of Sri Aurobindo, Agni, the supposed "god of fire," is really the will power of the individual which manifests specifically in the practice of yoga. This is not the whimsical will power of egoic goals, but the will to liberate our consciousness from all bonds. This manifests exclusively in spiritual practice, not in philosophizing or in feeling "spiritual." This is the highest form of action possible to any being in relativity, and merits our careful analysis.

Hidden in fire sticks

The fire for the Vedic sacrifice is kindled by the friction of two sticks. The upanishad uses this as a simile, saying that the yogic fire "lies hidden in fire sticks." Both the Kaivalya and the Swetashwatara Upanishads explain this as follows.

"The mind may be compared to a firestick, the syllable OM to another. Rub the two sticks together by repeating the sacred syllable and meditating on Brahman, and the flame of knowledge will be kindled in your heart and all impurities will be burnt away."[185] "Fire, though present in the firesticks, is not perceived until one stick is rubbed against another. The Self is like that fire: it is realized in the body by meditation on the sacred syllable OM."[186] Not only is the will to practice meditation produced by meditation on Om, so is the goal–enlightenment.

"Like a child well guarded in the womb"

The propensity toward the Divine is rare, and it is also fragile because the downward pull accumulated in thousands of previous lives threaten its very existence. Consequently, the wise sadhaka guards it well once it arises, ensuring that it can grow unhindered and in time come forth as the liberating force we need to be successful yogis. The observance of Yama and Niyama are absolutely essential in this,[187] as is the need to reorder one's life so as not to put this developing power in danger of harm or destruction.

"Worshiped day by day by awakened souls"

The idea of the previous section is being continued. The awakened (though no yet enlightened) soul cherishes the yogic will, and realizes that it is a worshipful thing–the Godward-tending divine power of the divine Self that moves within him like an embryo within the womb. Day by day he worships it by using it to meditate.

"Those who offer oblations in sacrificial fire"

Those who are consciously engaging in Ishwarapranidhana, the offering of the life to

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[184] Katha Upanishad 2:1:8

[185] Kaivalya Upanishad 11

[186] Swetashwatara Upanishad 1:13

[187] See *The Foundations of Yoga.*

God,[188] extend the power of their spiritual will beyond the practice of meditation into every moment of their life and activity, using it to accomplish a spiritualized mode of life. Here, too, the necessity for reordering the life of the sadhaka is evident.

May that divine Agni be enkindled and maintained within us.

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188 See *The Foundations of Yoga.*

The Infinite Self

"What is within us is also without. What is without is also within. He who sees difference between what is within and what is without goes evermore from death to death."[189] These words have various levels of meaning, and we should consider them all.

Microcosms

Many years ago, Dr. Judith Tyberg, a disciple of Sri Aurobindo and director of the East-West Cultural Center in Los Angeles, told me that she had attended a lecture at Benares Hindu University in which a map of the universe and charts from *Gray's Anatomy* were compared and seen to be strikingly alike. Our bodies are little models of the universe.

Some months before she told this to me I had experienced this for myself. While meditating one day all ordinary physical sensation vanished. Spatial relation ceased to exist and I found myself keenly aware of being beyond dimension, neither large nor small, but infinite (for infinity is beyond size). Although the terminology is inappropriate to such a state, to make it somewhat understandable I have to say that I perceived an infinity of worlds "within" me. Suns–some solo and others surrounded by planets–glimmered inside my spaceless space. Not that I *saw* the light, but I *felt* or intuited it.[190] Actually, I did not "see" anything–and yet I did. It is not expressible in terms of ordinary sense experience, yet I must use those terms. I experienced myself as everything that existed within the relative material universe. Or so it seemed, for the human body is a miniature universe, a microcosmic model of the macrocosm. The physical human body is a reflection of the universal womb that conceived it. I had experienced the subtle level of the physical body that is its ideational (i.e., causal) blueprint. On that level it can be experienced as a map of the material creation.

In this matter, it was crucial that I not mistake the copy for the Original and think I was an infinite being or had attained Cosmic Consciousness. It was Macrocosmic Consciousness–not an insignificant experience, but certainly not the final step in evolution.

"As above, so below"

In the Hermetic Philosophy of the ancient Mediterranean world there was a principle: "As above, so below." That is, this material plane of existence is a mirroring of higher levels of being all the way up to the Absolute. Therefore, by studying earthly phenomena we can gain some idea of heavenly things. Also, that material conditions are reflections of psychic forces. Astrology is an example of this. The physical planets, through universal gravitation, certainly have some influence on our physical being, but their movements are indications of the arising and subsiding of inner, subtle energies that greatly affect us, both psychologically and externally.

We need to realize that the inner is always more real than the outer. The thirty-fourth Ode

[189] Katha Upanishad 2:1:10

[190] Saint Teresa of Avila wrote about what she called "intellectual visions"–visions in which things are not seen as with the physical eyes, but which are perceived intellectually as concepts or ideas of visual appearances. That is, even though a visionary might be able to draw what was "seen" and could certainly speak of form, color, and all the traits of ordinary visual experience it would all have been perceived by the intellect rather than the inner senses. Actually, she was speaking of the difference between astral vision and causal vision. This latter is much higher than the former–as she also affirmed. Evelyn Underhill discusses intellectual vision extensively in her book *Mysticism*.

of Solomon, one of the earliest Christian hymns, says: "The likeness of that which is below is that which is above. For everything is above, and below there is nothing, but it is believed to be by those in whom there is no knowledge."[191]

This is also true in yoga. Everything real happens in the head–the Sahasrara, the Thousand-petalled Lotus, the astral/causal brain. This is why Paramhansa Nityananda told his students: "Awareness [buddhi] should be concentrated in the head. Your attention should always be above the neck; never below the neck."[192] Yogis should never look to or trust phenomena that take place in the body below the Sahasrara.

Outer/inner

The outer is the inner; the inner is the outer. We have touched on this slightly. It is of inestimable importance to realize that our outer life is but a mirror image of our inner life, that whatever is taking place in our external body and environment is happening in the depths of our mind. So by studying and analyzing our outer life we come to gauge the true character of our inner life. This is not palatable to the ego, for it means that our misfortunes are our own doing and reveal our inner negativity. As the Chinese maxim has it: When mean-spirited people live behind the door, mean-spirited people come in front of the door. So let us be careful before we indulge in a litany of all the wrongs we have suffered and all the bad people that have done those wrongs to us. We will only be confessing our own sins. It is not sympathy we need, but self-correction. As a very wise book, *The Astral City*, says: "Self-pity is a symptom of mental illness."

Consistency

It is also necessary that our inner and outer lives be identical. We are all aware that very corrupt people can act and speak in a seemingly virtuous way. Also, many soft-hearted people pretend to be callous or even prickly. But neither is admirable. "What you see is what you get" should be our rule of life. Our outer life must be an exact imaging of our inner life. In the Gospel of Thomas, section 22, Jesus tells his disciples that they will enter the kingdom of God: "When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below."

The inner and outer Reality

God is the inner, and God is the outer. "He who sees difference between what is within and what is without goes evermore from death to death." We are bound to the cycle of perpetual births and deaths until we see God, both within and without–until we know that God is the sole reality of both "the world" and ourselves. In that vision we become immortal. The great Swami Sivananda wrote the following expressing this truth:

> When I surveyed from Ananda Kutir, Rishikesh,
> By the side of the Tehri Hills, only God I saw.
> In the Ganges and the Kailas peak,
> In the famous Chakra Tirtha of Naimisar also, only God I saw.

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[191] Odes of Solomon 34:4, 5

[192] Chidakasha Gita 276

In tribulation and in grief, in joy and in glee,
In sickness and in sorrow, only God I saw.
In birds and dogs, in stones and trees,
In flowers and fruits, in the sun, moon and stars, only God I saw.

In the rosy cheeks of Kashmiri ladies,
In the black faces of African negroes, only God I saw.
In filth and scents, in poison and dainties,
In the market and in society, only God I saw.

In Brahmakara Vritti and Vedantic Nididhyasana,
In Atmic Vichara and Atmic Chintana, only God I saw.
In Kirtan and Nama Smaran, in Sravana and Vandana,
In Archana and Padasevana, in Dasya and Atmanivedana, only God I saw.

Like camphor I was melting in His fire of knowledge,
Amidst the flames outflashing, only God I saw.
My Prana entered the Brahmarandhra at the Moordha,
Then I looked with God's eyes, only God I saw.

I passed away into nothingness, I vanished,
And lo, I was the all-living, only God I saw.
I enjoyed the Divine Aisvarya, all God's Vibhutis,
I had Visvaroopa Darshan, the Cosmic Consciousness, only God I saw.

Glory, glory unto the Lord, hail! hail! hail! O sweet Ram.
Let me sing once more Thy Name–Ram Ram Ram, Om, Om, Om, only God I saw.

The seeing mind

Jesus, who said: "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God,"[193] had learned this well in India. For the next verse of the Katha Upanishad tells us: "By the purified mind alone is the indivisible Brahman to be attained. Brahman alone is–nothing else is. He who sees the manifold universe, and not the one reality, goes evermore from death to death."[194]

The necessary purification is profound, for Saint John tells us: "Every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he [God] is pure."[195] Those whose minds have been made pure in the contemplation of God automatically see Him. As Patanjali explains: "God is a Spirit.......His designator is Om. Its constant repetition and meditation is the way. From it result the disappearance of obstacles and the turning inward of consciousness." And, more importantly, they *attain* God, as the upanishad says. They come to know themselves as gods

[193] Matthew 5:8

[194] Katha Upanishad 2:1:11

[195] I John 3:3

within God.

The universe and ourselves are in an ineffable way part of the indivisible Brahman. That is why Jesus said: "This is life eternal: that they might know thee the only true God."[196] And why the upanishad tell us that "He who sees the manifold universe, and not the one reality, goes evermore from death to death."

The upanishad calls us to see God and enter into Life Eternal.

[196] John 17:3

The Dweller in the Heart

For numberless ages, in the rest of the world people were intent on the awesome greatness of God–and nothing more. Whereas in India the sages were intent on the awesome greatness of both the individual and the Universal Selves. Perceiving their unity, they understood that whatever can be said about one can be said about the other. Thus their teachings are a unique revelation of the true nature of us all. Without this self-understanding, our life is nothing but confusion with a few random stumblings into insight. It is an absolute necessity that we comprehend the upanishadic teachings and strive to gain the upanishadic vision.

In the lotus of the heart

"That being, of the size of a thumb, dwells deep within the heart. He is the lord of time, past and future. Having attained him, one fears no more. He, verily, is the immortal Self."[197] This verse tells us several things about our true Self.

That being, of the size of a thumb, dwells deep within the heart. Since the Self transcends space, how can it have a measurable size? It cannot. Shankara explains in his commentary that "the lotus of the heart is of the size of a thumb. Existing in the space within the lotus of the heart, [the Self] has the size of a thumb, just like space existing in a section of a bamboo that is of the size of a thumb." Just as water filling a vessel sunk in the ocean has volume and shape, in the same way the Self seems to have a shape and a measure. But once the vessel is broken, the shape and volume of the water cease to be, and so it is with the Self. Incarnate in a body, the Self pervades it and reflects it, but upon the dissolution of the body those seeming conditions cease instantly, for they have no objective reality. So it is not the Self that is really of the size of a thumb, but rather the lotus of the heart within which it momentarily dwells.

We should not mistake the lotus of the heart for the organ that pumps blood through the body. The real lotus of the heart is the core of the Thousand-Petalled Lotus, the Sahasrara located in the head. This thumb-shaped nucleus is also referred to in yogic teachings as "the Linga in the head."

"Deep within the heart" indicates that the Self is the inmost level of our being, our absolute essence beyond which we simply do not exist. It also indicates that to know ourself we must meditate and penetrate deep into our consciousness. There is no other way.

He is the lord of time, past and future. It is a grave error to think that we are helpless flotsam and jetsam on the bosom of the ocean of Relativity, being moved about by forces such as karma, our thoughts, and even God. It is our own Self that determines whatever happens to us and is the sole controller of our past, present, and future. Look at the chaotic lives of those who "trust in God" and "surrender to the Divine Will." They rationalize their disordered state by saying they have peace of mind through their attitude, but that is a poor substitute for the truth. Look at how many people die peacefully. Peace counts for little when it is nothing more than an opiate. We must stop living a lie. It is not our karma, our thinking, or even God that ordains our life. It is our Self. And until we unite our awareness with the Self we shall know nothing but uncertainty and confusion. But when we do, "sorrow melts into that clear peace"[198]

[197] Katha Upanishad 2:1:12

[198] Bhagavad Gita 2:65

which is ours forever.

Having attained him, one fears no more. For what can produce fear in the knower of the Self? As Emily Bronte wrote:

O God within my breast,
Almighty, ever-present Deity!
Life, that in me has rest,
As I, undying Life, have power in Thee!

Vain are the thousand creeds
That move men's hearts: unutterably vain;
Worthless as withered weeds,
Or idlest froth amid the boundless main,

To waken doubt in one
Holding so fast by Thy infinity,
So surely anchored on
The steadfast rock of Immortality.

The smokeless flame

"That being, of the size of a thumb, is like a flame without smoke. He is the lord of time, past and future, the same today and tomorrow. He, verily, is the immortal Self."[199] Now we learn some more essential facts about our Self.

Like a flame without smoke. The Self is pure light without covering or admixture. In our present state of delusion we think that the Self can be inhibited and even corrupted, but that is not so. The various energy levels within which the Self is dwelling certainly can be inhibited, corrupted, and even destroyed. If we identify with those levels we will live in fear and uncertainty, relieved only occasionally by utterly false hopes. "It is your ignorance, it is the world's delusion that gives you these dreams"[200] of both hope and fear. But once our consciousness is posited in the Self, all that is past, dispelled by the eternal Light of the Self.

The same today and tomorrow. The changeless nature of the Self puts us beyond all fear, concern, and anxiety, "knowing It birthless, knowing It deathless, knowing It endless, for ever unchanging."[201] The Self really has no past, present or future. It is, itself, the Eternal Now.

Liberating unity

"As rain, fallen on a hill, streams down its side, so runs he after many births who sees manifoldness in the Self."[202] The "gravity" of delusion pulls inexorably downward those who think that the many layers of their incarnate existence are the Self. Yet, they do not think they are enslaved by the consequences of their ignorance, but think they have free will as they "run" into the valleys of darkness and pain. "It's my life, and I will do what I want to," they shout as they roll downward into the jaws of sorrow and death. Only when the unity of our Self

[199] Katha Upanishad 2:1:13

[200] Bhagavad Gita 5:14

[201] Bhagavad Gita 2:21

[202] Katha Upanishad 2:1:14

is known–both in the fact of its unitary state of being and its eternal oneness with Brahman–will the earthward pull disappear along with the compulsion to continual rebirth. "If a man sees Brahman in every action, He will find Brahman."[203] It *is* as simple as that.

Ever the same

"As pure water poured into pure water remains pure, so does the Self remain pure, O Nachiketa, uniting with Brahman."[204]

We and Brahman are one Substance. There is no difference. We are not "creations," we are beginningless and endless,[205] co-eternal with God. Knowing this makes all the difference–the only difference we need. Brahman is Pure Being and we are Pure Being. Uniting with Brahman we remain what we always have been, but no longer subject to ignorance and delusion. As Jesus said: "Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out."[206] The Self does not change, but becomes irrevocably established in the consciousness of its changelessness.

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[203] Bhagavad Gita 4:24

[204] Katha Upanishad 2:1:15

[205] "There was never a time when I did not exist, nor you, nor any of these kings. Nor is there any future in which we shall cease to be." (Bhagavad Gita 2:12)

[206] Revelation 3:12

The Birthless Self

The subject of the Self is virtually inexhaustible. It is the sole object of the upanishads. So Yamaraj continues to expound the Self to Nachiketa.

"To the Birthless, the light of whose consciousness forever shines, belongs the city of eleven gates. He who meditates on the ruler of that city knows no more sorrow. He attains liberation, and for him there can no longer be birth or death. For the ruler of that city is the immortal Self."[207]

This verse tells us many aspects of the Self, each of which should be scrutinized in turn.

Birthless

A cornerstone of Eastern wisdom is the understanding that verbal formulas can never encompass the truth, but can only be hints, albeit excellent hints–that truth is always beyond books, concepts, and words; that in time the aspirant must pass beyond them into the level of spiritual intuition in which direct knowledge is possible. Yet it is understood that the aspirant will not be able to fully translate such direct knowledge into words. As the adage says: "He who knows tells it not; he who tells knows it not." Not from an attitude of arcane secrecy (always a symptom of spiritual pathology), but from the fact that knowing transcends speech and (discursive) thought.

Nevertheless, "According to your faith be it unto you."[208] And faith is conceptual, even if not fully verbal. Consequently, our ideas about ourselves, our nature, and our life have a profound influence on our life and its unfoldment. If we think we are sinful mortals, we shall live like sinful mortals, incapable of reaching God. If we think we are evolving consciousness, moving onward to spiritual heights, we shall evolve beyond human limitations. But if we think we are eternal beings, part of God's infinite Being, we shall rise to the state of Divine Unity and manifest the declaration: "Ye are gods."[209]

It is necessary, then, for us to firmly set in mind that we are birthless beings, that we have never "come into being" or been "created." Rather, we are co-eternal with God, the Essence of our existence. We never came into being, nor shall we ever cease to be.[210] When we understand that our consciousness is somehow a wave of the Infinite Consciousness that is God, that we are irrevocably a part of God's infinite Light and Life, it will have a transforming effect on us.

Sri Ramakrishna was fond of the simile of a washerman's donkey. Each night the washerman passes a rope around the legs of the donkey and then removes it. The donkey believes it has been tied, so it never tries to move away from that spot. Its bondage is imaginary, yet because of its belief it is as bound as though it were tied. It is the same with us. If we believe we are bound, we shall be bound. But if we believe we are free we can manifest that freedom. This is what yoga–and yoga alone–is all about.

[207] Katha Upanishad 2:2:1

[208] Matthew 9:29

[209] Psalms 82:6

[210] "There was never a time when I did not exist, nor you, nor any of these kings. Nor is there any future in which we shall cease to be." (Bhagavad Gita 2:12)

The light of consciousness

God cannot be defined, but it can be said that God is Light[211]–even more, that God is the Light that is Life.[212] In other words, God is Conscious Light. And so are we. If this is realized, then we will not identify with the change and dissolution that is inherent in relative existence. The hymn says: "Change and decay in all around I see; O Thou Who changest not, abide with me." The mistake is in thinking that what is needed is God as a separate being, when what is really needed is the abiding awareness of our own Self, of which God is the Essence. As the Psalmist sang: "I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness....When I awake, I am still with thee."[213]

Forever shines

Our divine nature may be obscured to our earthly eyes in the way that clouds can hide the sun and even make the earth dark. But the sun ever shines. Night occurs because of the turning of the earth, and spiritual ignorance and darkness arise because our awareness is turned wrong. Yet, as Buddha said: "Turn around and lo! The Other Shore." And Jesus said over and over: "The kingdom of heaven is at hand"–right here where it has always been. It is only a matter of attunement of consciousness. Again, that is where yoga comes in.

The Self is what It is forever, nothing can alter that. So what we need is a recovering of Consciousness. It need not be produced or even gained–only recognized. This is difficult for us to grasp since we have become habituated to the ways of relativity in which everything is a "process" moving along in stages. Yoga reveals the Truth of our Selves, and since the clouds of illusion have to be moved aside to reveal the ever-shining Self, yoga appears to be a process, too, but essentially it is not. Yoga is simply Seeing True.

The city of eleven gates

The human body is usually called "the city of nine gates" for the nine apertures of the body, but here it has the number eleven. Shankara says this is because the navel and the Brahmarandhra, the "soft spot" at the crown of the head are also being counted as gates. This is appropriate, as before birth we are nourished through the navel, and at death we often depart through the Brahmarandhra.

The important point that is being made here is in contradistinction to religions other than Hinduism, and even to the attitudes found today in contemporary Indian philosophy. For it is commonly thought very "spiritual" to disregard the body, push it aside in our consciousness, and despise it as a liability and even a prison. But the upanishad tells us that the body is not alien to the Self (atman), but rather belongs to the Self, just as the cosmos belongs to God–and is in a sense the "body" of God. (It is important to continually keep in mind that whatever can be said of God can usually be said about the individual being, as well.) The body is ours, and is fundamentally a mirroring of our personal consciousness, which is why we can legitimately speak of "the body-mind connection."

The body is the vehicle through which the individual evolves during the span of life on

[211] "God is light." (I John 1:5)

[212] "In him was life; and the life was the light of men....That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world." (John 1:4, 9)

[213] Psalms 17:15; 139:18

earth, and must be taken into serious account by the yogi who will discover that the body can exert a necessary effect on the mind. For example, the yogi meditates with upturned eyes and discovers that the process of yoga takes place in the thousand-petalled lotus of the brain. Turning the eyes upward in meditation is extremely simple, but it is the major "technique" of yoga. For, as Paramhansa Nityananda said: "All takes place to a raja yogi in the brain center.[214]...What is called Raja Yoga is above the neck."[215] Furthermore, the yogi joins the japa (repetition) of Om to the breath[216]–a physical process known as pranayama.[217]

The yogi who observes will discover that the diet of the physical body is also the diet of the mind, that whatever is eaten physically will have an effect mentally. One who does not know this is no yogi at all.

No more sorrow

"He who meditates on the ruler of that city knows no more sorrow." When we meditate on our Self, our atman, we will end all sorrow. The Gita says of the yogi who meditates on the Self: "To obey the Atman is his peaceful joy; sorrow melts into that clear peace: his quiet mind is soon established in peace."[218] "When, through the practice of yoga, the mind ceases its restless movements, and becomes still, he realizes the Atman. It satisfies him entirely. Then he knows that infinite happiness which can be realized by the purified heart but is beyond the grasp of the senses. He stands firm in this realization. Because of it, he can never again wander from the inmost truth of his being. Now that he holds it he knows this treasure above all others: faith so certain shall never be shaken by heaviest sorrow. To achieve this certainty is to know the real meaning of the word yoga. It is the breaking of contact with pain. You must practice this yoga resolutely, without losing heart."[219]

We must meditate on the Self–not on external deities or symbolic forms of psychic states. As Sri Ma Sarada Devi said: "After attaining wisdom one sees that gods and deities are all maya."[220] The upanishads, Gita, and Yoga Sutras know nothing of meditating on "ishta devatas"–only on Om, for Om is our Self. Here are a few upanishadic statements on the subject:

"The Self is of the nature of the Syllable Om."[221]

"Directly realize the self by meditating on Om."[222]

"The Self is of the nature of the Syllable Om. Thus the Syllable Om is the very Self."[223]

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[214] Chidakasha Gita 214

[215] Chidakasha Gita 248

[216] "With Om alone he should breathe" (Amritabindu Upanishad 20). "Because in this manner he joins the breath and the Syllable Om, this is called Yoga [joining] (Maitri Upanishad 6:22-26).

[217] "Pranayama is composed of the Pranava, Om; [therefore] he should repeat the Pranava mentally. This only will be pranayama" (Darshan Upanishad 6:2,5,6). "Pranayama is accomplished through concentrating the mind on Om" (Saubhagyalakshmi Upanishad). "The Pranava alone becomes the pranayama" (Shandilya Upanishad 6:2). "Pranayama is accomplished by effortlessly breathing and joining to it the repetition of the sacred Om" (*Yoga Vashishtha* 5:78).

[218] Bhagavad Gita 2:65

[219] Bhagavad Gita 6:20-23

[220] *Precepts For Perfection* 672.

[221] Mandukya Upanishad 1.8.12

[222] Vedantasara Upanishad 1

[223] Mandukya Upanishad 1,8,12

"Meditate on Om as the Self."[224]

"Om is the atman himself."[225]

"Om is a single syllable that is of the nature of the Self....Om is the true form of the Self."[226]

Liberation–no longer birth or death

"He attains liberation, and for him there can no longer be birth or death."

There is no need for commentary, but here is some corroboration:

"Know this Atman unborn, undying, never ceasing, never beginning, deathless, birthless, how can It die the death of the body?"[227]

"The seers...reach enlightenment. Then they are free from the bondage of rebirth, and pass to that state which is beyond all evil."[228]

"Knowing the Atman, man finds Nirvana that is in Brahman, here and hereafter."[229]

Immortal

"For the ruler of that city is the immortal Self."

The Gita encapsulates it perfectly:

"This true wisdom I have taught will lead you to immortality. The faithful practice it with devotion, taking me for their highest aim. To me they surrender heart and mind. They are exceedingly dear to me."[230]

"For I am Brahman within this body, life immortal that shall not perish: I am the Truth and the Joy for ever."[231]

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[224] Mundaka Upanishad 2.2.3-6

[225] Narasingha Uttara-Tapiniya Upanishad

[226] Tarasara Upanishad

[227] Bhagavad Gita 2:20

[228] Bhagavad Gita 2:51

[229] Bhagavad Gita 5:26

[230] Bhagavad Gita 12:20

[231] Bhagavad Gita 14:27

The Shining Self

"The immortal Self is the sun shining in the sky, he is the breeze blowing in space, he is the fire burning on the altar, he is the guest dwelling in the house; he is in all men, he is in the gods, he is in the ether, he is wherever there is truth; he is the fish that is born in water, he is the plant that grows in the soil, he is the river that gushes from the mountain–he, the changeless reality, the illimitable!"[232]

Where in all the scriptures of the world can we find such a thrilling statement–thrilling and glorious because it is TRUE?

The two that are One

To fully comprehend the teachings of the upanishadic sages we must keep in mind that whatever can be said of the Paramatman on the cosmic, universal level can usually also be said of the jivatman on the level of our individual life within the cosmos. So the upanishads are describing not only God, the Supreme Spirit, but the nature of our own individual spirit.

What is needed

There is another, essential, side to this upanishadic statement–and indeed to all scriptural teachings–that must be kept in mind at all times in our study: We must *experience* and *know* the realities spoken of by the sages. They did not write down their perceptions for us to merely accept them and be intellectually convinced of their veracity. Rather, they wrote them down as signposts so we could check our own perceptions against them. Never did they mean for their writings to become dogmas and doctrines. They assume that their readers will be yogis like themselves, sadhaka-pilgrims pressing on toward the ultimate frontiers of consciousness.

This is the absolutely unique character of the basic texts of Sanatana Dharma. All other scriptures, including those of later authorship in India as well as those of other religions, are statements of "truths" we are supposed to accept "on faith" without question. This is why intelligent investigation and analysis are so little valued by the expounders of those scriptures, why nearly all religions warn their adherents away from reading the books of "heretics" and demand that they shun their company. Intellectual fearlessness terrifies "the chosen faithful" and sets their teeth on edge.

But no religious system that employs a single bond can lead us to freedom. For example, in Yoga, yama and niyama are not "commandments" but helpful information. Just as we learn what food is harmful to the body, so from Patanjali we learn what conduct limits and clouds the consciousness of the aspiring yogi. If we wish to ignore his counsel, that is our own concern. No one will call us to account for our heedlessness except our own Self. Those who are fit to be yogis joyfully learn what to cultivate and what to avoid, and live accordingly. Those who drag their feet, sigh, and sullenly demand mitigations, are simply not fit for yoga and should occupy themselves in other areas. This is why Jesus asked: "Which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that

[232] Katha Upanishad 2:2:2

behold it begin to mock him, saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish."[233]

Every yogi must be *adhikarin*–qualified and worthy, fit for yoga and capable of its total practice. Jesus said: "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."[234] It is interesting that he likens spiritual life to the cumbersome wooden yoke of oxen or bullocks, assuring us that it will be restful and easy and light to bear. How is this? To a strong ox or bullock the heaviest of yokes will be of no consequence. So if we are the kind of people for whom yoga is intended, its requirements and disciplines will be light and easeful. But if, instead of being oxen or bullocks we are dogs and swine–symbols used by Jesus for the unworthy–the "light and easy" yoke will break our backs! This is why some people should take up bowling or surfing and forget religion altogether, what to say of yoga.

For the serious seekers, though, the ancient rishis hold back nothing, but give the full picture of the Self.

"The immortal Self"

The self can appear (please note I say "appear") to enter into numberless conditions and interior states. It even experiences millions of births and deaths, yet It never really dies, for immortality is a fundamental trait of Its nature. It is not easy, but the yogi must cultivate a continual awareness that he is Immortal Being–never anything less, and never anything more–and order his life accordingly. I do not mean by this that he denies his present (seeming) condition, but that, as Yogananda continually advised, he is always aware that he is only sitting in the motion picture theatre of the cosmos watching a movie that, cosmic as its scope may be, can be wiped away in a moment, that only he and the other viewers are real, that all must eventually leave the theater and go home to Infinity. How splendid are the truths of the Vedanta!

"The sun"

The Self is the source of all light–the Inner Light of Consciousness that illumines all things. For outside the Self there is no perception of even the brightest of material suns. It is the presence of the Self that produces awareness of all phenomena. Outside the Self nothing at all exists. Within the Self is everything.

"Shining in the sky"

The Self shines in the "sky" of the Chidakasha, the subtle Ether (Akasha). The Chidakasha is the infinite, all-pervading expanse of Consciousness from which all "things" proceed; the true "heart" of all things. The "shining" of the Self in the Chidakasha is the emanation of Om. In the individual, the Chidakasha is the subtle space of Consciousness located in the Sahasrara, the Thousand-petalled Lotus that is the astral/causal brain. From that point Om, the Word of Life (Pranava) enlivens and illumines all things; which is why we meditate upon Om in the head.

"The breeze blowing in space"

[233] Luke 14:28-30

[234] Matthew 11:28-30

The Self is also that power which moves within the Chidakasha as the wind moves within earthly space. As the wind causes movement in the trees and on the surfaces of earth and water, in the same way it is the Self that produces all movement in the cosmos, in all the worlds gross and subtle.

"The fire burning on the altar"

The Self is the transmuting force of Cosmic Fire on the altar of the universe. In India of the upanishadic rishis there were no temples, nor were there any external religious rites other than the sandhya (morning and evening salutations of the sun) and the havan, the fire ritual in which by the agency of consecrated fire the offerings were transformed into subtle energy forms and transferred into higher worlds. The Self, then is the ultimate transmuting power which evolves both the cosmos and the personal energies of the individual spirits within it. The entire universe is an altar in which, through the power of the Self, all things are offerings unto–and *into*–Infinite Being.

"The guest dwelling in the house"

All things, even the least atom, are "houses" for the all-pervading Self. All things that exist have the Self as their inmost dweller. Where there is any objecting "thing," there is the Self. Yet, since no things are permanent, the Self is only a momentary Guest–but none the less real for that.

"In all men"

What is meaningful to us is the truth that the Self is the dweller in all consciousness beings. And since they are not "things," the Self is not a guest but the permanent Indweller as the Self of the Self. The consciousness of each one of is the only temple is which Spirit ever dwells in Its essential being. Although it can be said that in a sense our bodies are temples of God, that is not really true in the purest sense. Only in our consciousness is Spirit to be found. This is why the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita insist that we must identify with the Self alone, seeing all else as mirages destined to dissolve away and cease to exist. Their message has been summed up by Shankara in these words: "Brahman is real. The world is illusory. The jiva is nothing but Brahman."

"In the gods"

In the upanishads, "gods" mean not only highly evolved beings that can control the forces of nature, etc., "gods" are also our higher faculties of perception which illumine our awareness of both the inner and outer worlds. Here the idea is that the Self is the enlivening power by which our higher faculties function.

"In the ether"

The Ether, the Chidakasha, is the natural home of the Self. Only in this inmost level of being can the Self be always perceived. In the lesser levels we usually "lose" the Self by losing perception of It. How can we establish ourselves in "etheric awareness"? Through the unique property of akasha: *sound*–specifically, through the japa and meditation of Om, as Patanjali has stated in the Yoga Sutras. In the Vedanta Sutras of the sage Vyasa (also called the Brahma

Sutras) he tells *us: "Anavrittih shabdai*–By sound vibration one becomes liberated."[235]

"Wherever there is truth"

Wherever there is true knowing, there the Self is operative as the Sun of Consciousness, revealing both relative and absolute truth. For Truth is Its nature. A popular Sanskrit adage is: "Truth alone conquers," meaning that victory over ignorance and bondage is found only in the Self, the ultimate Truth.

"The fish that is born in water"

Egotism is a prime train of human beings–usually in the form of outright arrogance. In religion this manifests in the insistence that human beings are superior to all other beings. Even in India we have the idea that "even the gods pray for human birth" because supposedly only human beings can be enlightened. In Christianity there is an insistence that human beings are higher than angels because they alone can be "saved" through Christ. In the most ignorant of religions there is the insistence that only human beings are immortal and that animals are some kind of animated machines, that human beings alone are "in the image of God" and suchlike.

Therefore the upanishad tells us the truth: that even in the dullest of animals–the fish–the Self is present, that the fish is the Self in manifestation, as are we.

"The plant that grows in the soil"

Lest we confine the Self to animal life, the upanishad further tells us that plants are dwellingplaces of the Self, too.

"The river that gushes from the mountain"

And lest we think that the Self in only in "living" things, the seers assure us that in inanimate things the Self is living and moving. Everything is alive in Spirit. What a sublime world-view!

"The changeless reality"

All the things listed as abodes of the Self are ever-changing, and their forms are evanescent, soon seen to be without permanent reality. Since we identify with what we see around us, we continually fall into the snare of thinking that we, too, change and have no ultimate reality. Even if we think otherwise intellectually, we keep acting in a delusive manner. Hence we must keep reminding ourselves that we are changeless and absolutely real.

"The illimitable"

Equally wonderful is the truth that we are beyond limitation, that infinite are our possibilities–for we are the Infinite Self.

The call

Those who embodied their realizations in the upanishads did not do so to furnish us with a bundle of beliefs to "take on faith" and wrangle over. Their intention was to spur us onward to attain the same vision as they possessed, to be sages equal with them, no longer "servants"

[235] Vedanta Sutras 4.4.22

but "friends."[236] Their call to us is the same as that of Swami Vivekananda, who continually exhorted his hearers: "Awake! Arise!"

[236] "Henceforth I call you not servants;...but I have called you friends." (John 15:15)

The Life-Giving Self

Just as children babble on aimlessly about things they do not understand, so we do the same, though in a more sophisticated way, especially in religion and philosophy. So the three verses relating to the Self and life are very much needed by us. First the upanishad tells us:

"He, the adorable one, seated in the heart, is the power that gives breath. Unto him all the senses do homage."[237]

Adorable

The word Prabhavananda translates "adorable" is *vamanam*, which means adorable, dear, and pleasing. These epithets are traditionally used in relation to Shiva, the symbol of the atman and atmic consciousness. This is important, for the Self is not just Truth or Reality–a mere abstraction–but when experienced as either the individual Self or the Supreme Self produces in us a personal response, literally the response of bhakti (devotion) and even prema (love).

In contemporary India there is the idea that bhakti and prema can only be experienced toward a being that possesses form (rupa) or qualities (guna)–that it is impossible to have these responses to Brahman the transcendent Being. But in the upanishads and the Gita we are constantly exhorted to love Brahman–not just some "forms" of Brahman–and the atman. This also indicates that the ancient upanishadic sages did not believe that the Absolute or the Self was without attributes of any kind. Rather, they considered that, although anything said would be only approximations of divine realities, still human beings could conceive of God in at least a dim way. And they absolutely could *experience* God, and have reactions and definitions arising from their experience. In Chapter Twelve Krishna speaks of this in more detail, and we will consider it there.

To the yogi, then, the Self and Brahman are equally adorable.

Seated in the heart

God and the Self are seated in the heart, as the upanishads and the Gita continually emphasize. There they abide permanently–it is not a matter of occasional visitations. Knowing this, Jesus said: "Behold, the kingdom of God is within you."[238] This, too, is a matter of direct experience. Saint Luke used the word *idou*–in other words, "*See for yourself* that the kingdom of God is within you." This is not something Jesus wants us to believe and act on blindly–he wants us to experience this truth, for only experience produces lasting effects.

The heart is the throne of God and the throne of the divine Self. When Jesus says: "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne,"[239] he is speaking of our heart–not his. Our heart and the heart of God are not the same, but they are ONE.

Power that gives breath

[237] Katha Upanishad 2:2:3

[238] Luke 17:21

[239] Revelation 3:21

The upanishads literally say that it is the Self which produces our inhalations and exhalations. "Who could live, who could breathe, if that blissful self dwelt not within the lotus of the heart?"[240] "The Self is the breath of the breath."[241] "The breaths are the Real, and their Reality is the Self."[242] "He who breathes in with your breathing in is your Self. He who breathes out with your breathing out is your Self."[243] "From him is born the breath."[244] "The shining, immortal person who is breath is the Self, is Brahman."[245] "Which is the one God? The breath. He is Brahman."[246]

In the spiritual texts of India the word hridaya–heart–means not just the heart, or core, but also is said to indicate the space (akasha) where the inbreath and outbreath merge–the ultimate heart. This is why yoga must involve working with the inhaling and exhalation breaths in the form of subtle pranayama. "The breath is the Supreme Brahman. The breath never deserts him who, knowing thus, meditates upon it. Having become a god, he goes to the gods."[247] "They who know the breath of the breath...have realized the ancient, primordial Brahman."[248]

The senses do homage

In the primal texts of Sanatana Dharma we find references to "gods" (devas). In modern Hinduism we find a panorama of all kinds of gods, demigods, and suchlike, so it is supposed that the ancient tests refer to them when speaking of "devas." But a simple perusal of the context of those references reveal that the upanishadic sages meant the senses (jnanendriyas), not some kind of external deific intelligences.

The senses "do homage" in the sense that in the evolved individual they draw near to (upasate) and become merged in the Self, which is their source. Now this tells us two interesting and usually unsuspected things. First, that it is natural for the Self to control the senses, not to be their slave. Second, it is completely natural for the senses to move inward toward the Self and experience the Self by uniting with It. Neither of these is our present experience. Rather, we consider it normal for the Self to be bound by the senses, and for it to require great struggle to turn them inward and bring them to experience of the Self. Evidently we have lived in a subnormal condition so long that we have come to think subnormality is normal. We are like the drunk man who was walking along with one foot on the sidewalk and the other down in the street. When someone stopped him and asked why he was walking that way, he burst into tears and answered: "Thank God! I thought I was a cripple."

Basically, the Self is the goal of all.

The essence

The upanishad then asks: "What can remain when the dweller in this body leaves the

[240] Taittiriya Upanishad 2:7

[241] Kena Upanishad 1:2

[242] Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2.1.20

[243] Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3.4.1

[244] Mundaka Upanishad 2.1.2,3

[245] Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2.5.4

[246] Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3.9.9

[247] Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.1.3

[248] Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.4.18

outgrown shell, since he is, verily, the immortal Self?"[249] The answer is quite simple: nothing but the body remains, for the Self is as different from the body as the pearl is from the oyster and its shell. The departure of the Self produces death and decay, for it is the Self alone that gives–and is–life, the sustenance of the body.

Jesus, Himself a yogi having lived over half of his life in India, said: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God."[250] That is, we live not on matter, but on the very Life of God–because matter is only a modification of that Life Energy. The upanishad–which Jesus would have known–expresses the same idea by saying: "Man does not live by breath alone, but by him in whom is the power of breath."[251]

It is not breath that makes us live–though breath is the basis of our body's metabolism. This is why yogis can live without the physical act of breathing. What we cannot do without, and by which we do live is Him who is the source of breath, especially in His primeval form: Om, the Pranava, the Life-Giver, the Word of Life. Through the repetition and meditation of Om as recommended by Patanjali we enter into communication with the Lord, Ishwara, and then into unity with Him.

"For in him we live, and move, and have our being."[252]

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[249] Katha Upanishad 2:2:4

[250] Matthew 4:4

[251] Katha Upanishad 2:2:5

[252] Acts 17:28

The Eternal Brahman–The Eternal Self

Brahman and the Self

"And now, O Nachiketa, will I tell thee of the unseen, the eternal Brahman, and of what befalls the Self after death."[253]

This is an interesting juxtaposition: Brahman and the Self after death (of the body). The upanishad puts these together because Brahman and the Self are one, and after death the spirit recovers the memory of its immortality–its eternity. One with Brahman, the Self yet experiences many changes. Those changes may only be appearances, but they are nonetheless real, and profoundly affect the Self in its evolutionary journey. So they need to be set forth.

The ignorant

"Of those ignorant of the Self, some enter into beings possessed of wombs, others enter into plants–according to their deeds and the growth of their intelligence."[254]

Here again we have a most interesting thing. Instead of discussing the worlds entered by the spirit after bodily death, and their nature as reflections of the spirit's karma, physical rebirth is immediately being spoken of. This is because it takes a goodly degree of evolution for the subtle worlds to have meaning for the developing spirit. The undeveloped learn neither from earthly or astral experiences. Further, many of them simply go to sleep at the moment of death and awaken only at the moment of birth. The period of time in between does not exist for them in any meaningful sense.

In his commentary on this verse Shankara cites another upanishadic statement: "Creatures are born in accordance with their knowledge." For evolution is a matter of knowing (jnana). The spirits that are unaware of their true nature come back into two general categories: into living organisms that gestate them in some form or other, and plant life. Obviously, very little goes on in the life of the plant as far as consciousness is concerned. Only those who are "born" and live a life with some degree of control over a body vehicle can develop their consciousness to any significant extent.

Implicit in this verse is the principle of the transmigration of the atman from lower to higher forms of life. We start out as atoms of hydrogen, move into mineral forms, then plant forms, then "living" organisms, and then into the human body from which we shall eventually evolve into forms in higher worlds. For most of the time evolution is automatic and incredibly slow. But at some point we become capable of directing and enhancing our evolutionary movement. At first this is only through thinking and acting, but eventually we become capable of yoga, of fully taking charge of our growth in consciousness. Until this point is reached, little of any importance occurs to us. So the upanishad is starting at a basic rung of the ladder of evolution. But since, as I have said, nothing of much value take place on that level, the upanishad moves ahead quite a bit to the level when we are capable of dreaming–to at least the intelligent animal level.

Dream creation

[253] Katha Upanishad 2:2:6

[254] Katha Upanishad 2:2:7

"That which is awake in us even while we sleep, shaping in dream the objects of our desire–that indeed is pure, that is Brahman, and that verily is called the Immortal. All the worlds have their being in that, and no one can transcend it. That is the Self."[255]

It is a fundamental assertion of India's primal wisdom that there are four states of consciousness: jagrat (waking), swapna (dreaming), sushupti (dreamless sleep), and turiya, the pure consciousness that witnesses the first three. Turiya is the state proper to the Self–actually *is* the Self–which is why this verse speaks of It as "that which is awake in us even while we sleep."

"Shaping in dream the objects of our desire." But there is more to this Self than consciousness. It is also creative power. Although as yogis we use the terminology of Sankhya and speak of Purusha and Prakriti as two entities, we are only speaking of two aspects or views of the One Existence. They are absolutely One. The upanishad reveals this by telling us that the Self is not only Witness, It is also the Witnessed.

The Self is desireless, yet it shows us in dreams the things we desire. Why? Because the Self is more than Witness, It is Guide and Guru. In every way it is attempting to show us our present spiritual status. Dreams are one of the avenues for its teaching. It is true that dreams arise from the subconscious, but they do so at the impulse of the Self. Unfortunately our subconscious is distorted, like a badly ground lens, so the original imaging of the Self comes through to us distorted or partial, and the message is flawed. However, the more we clarify our minds through meditation, the more faithful our dreams will be to the original impulses from the Self. In time our dreams can become authentic spiritual visions, at least on occasion.

Although showing us our desires, the Self remains pure–the actual word being "white" to signify that the Self has no inherent "colors" (qualities or traits), for it is Brahman by nature. Thus it is also immortal, no matter how many "deaths" we may experience, both through the death of the body and the "little death" we experience each time we sleep–dreams being a kind of "after death" astral experience.

All "worlds," all levels of experience, arise from the Self in Union with Brahman. Nothing exists apart from the Self. The Self is also the ultimate Being. There is no "going beyond" it. Because it is one with Brahman, even conscious union with Brahman does not cancel out our awareness of the individual Atman. This is a most important principle, for many are led into the delusion that they have transcended the Self and "entered the Not-Self," when they have merely sunk into the morass of tamasic ignorance. They are suffering from the subtlest form of mental illness which in time will manifest as recognizable psychosis and lead to great mental and moral disintegration–in many instances to attempted or successful suicide.

The indwelling Self

"As fire, though one, takes the shape of every object which it consumes, so the Self, though one, takes the shape of every object in which it dwells. As air, though one, takes the shape of every object which it enters, so the Self, though one, takes the shape of every object in which it dwells."[256]

Each individual Self inhabits a vast number of body-vehicles as it moves up the ladder of evolution to the Highest. (For a detailed study of this, see *Ladder of Light*.) And in each one it appears to actually *become* that vehicle. Yet the Self remains only Itself, one and unique. In

[255] Katha Upanishad 2:2:8

[256] Katha Upanishad 2:2:9, 10

this way the Self gathers experiences of every form of life that exists. This is necessary for It if It is to approximate the status of Brahman, for Brahman, existing in all forms, has the experience of "being" all those forms. Hence the microcosmic Self mirrors the Macrocosmic Self.

The untouched Self

"As the sun, revealer of all objects to the seer, is not harmed by the sinful eye, nor by the impurities of the objects it gazes on, so the one Self, dwelling in all, is not touched by the evils of the world. For he transcends all."[257]

Having spoken to us of the fact that the Self somehow takes on the form of its many incarnational forms, the upanishad reminds us that the Self is nonetheless absolutely unmarked by that "formation" and undergoes no alteration or conditioning whatsoever. Even while immanent in relative existence, the Self remains essentially transcendent, in the same relation to its incarnate form as is Brahman to the universe. The divine eye of the Self illumines all things yet is affected by none.

Bliss and peace

"He is one, the lord and innermost Self of all; of one form, he makes of himself many forms. To him who sees the Self revealed in his own heart belongs eternal bliss–to none else, to none else!"[258]

The Self is ever the Master, however much the forms inhabited by the Self may be bound. The Self is the essential principle of the existence of all those forms, always remaining one and unchanged. He alone who beholds the Self in/as the core of his being possesses eternal bliss.

"Intelligence of the intelligent, eternal among the transient, he, though one, makes possible the desires of many. To him who sees the Self revealed in his own heart belongs eternal peace–to none else, to none else!"[259]

Consciousness of the conscious, the eternal link between all the temporal bodies Its inhabits, the Self it is that which "makes possible the desires of many" through countless incarnations. He alone who beholds the Self in/as the core of his being possesses eternal peace.

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[257] Katha Upanishad 2:2:11

[258] Katha Upanishad 2:2:12

[259] Katha Upanishad 2:2:13

The Radiant Self

Yamaraj has presented his student with a great deal of philosophical knowledge regarding the Self. This is all valuable, but Nachiketa feels impelled to ask a question, without the answer to which all the teaching on the Self means nothing. He asks: "How O King, shall I find that blissful Self, supreme, ineffable, who is attained by the wise? Does he shine by himself, or does he reflect another's light?"[260] It is pointless to hear about the Self if we do not know how to find the Self. It is true that in metaphysical realms the majority of people are enamored of theory and discussion without practical application, but the wise see things differently. Nachiketa has already grasped the fundamental nature of the Self.

Blissful

Analysis shows that the basic motivation of all beings is bliss (ananda) or happiness (sukham), that all the things we strive for are only prized because their acquisition will give rise to joy. In this perspective we see that all beings are in search of the Self, for It alone is of the nature of joy. Once a person grasps this fact–really grasps it–he can only seek for the Self, all else being seen as insignificant.

In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad we find the following relevant exposition:

"It is not for the sake of the husband, my beloved, that the husband is dear, but for the sake of the Self.

"It is not for the sake of the wife, my beloved, that the wife is dear, but for the sake of the Self.

"It is not for the sake of the children, my beloved, that the children are dear, but for the sake of the Self.

"It is not for the sake of wealth, my beloved, that wealth is dear, but for the sake of the Self.

"It is not for the sake of the Brahmins, my beloved, that the Brahmins are held in reverence, but for the sake of the Self.

"It is not for the sake of the Kshatriyas, my beloved, that the Kshatriyas are held in honor, but for the sake of the Self.

"It is not for the sake of the higher worlds, my beloved, that the higher worlds are desired, but for the sake of the Self.

"It is not for the sake of the gods, my beloved, that the gods are worshiped, but for the sake of the Self.

"It is not for the sake of the creatures, my beloved, that the creatures are prized, but for the sake of the Self.

"It is not for the sake of itself, my beloved, that anything whatever is esteemed, but for the sake of the Self.

"The Self, Maitreyi, is to be known. Hear about it, reflect upon it, meditate upon it. By knowing the Self, my beloved, through hearing, reflection, and meditation, one comes to know all things."[261]

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[260] Katha Upanishad 2:2:14

[261] Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2.4.5

Supreme

The Self is supreme–there is nothing that is higher or more desirable than the Self; there is nothing that exists beyond the Self. It is supreme because It is Existence Itself. There is no reality other than the Self. We must seek the Self because only the Self can be attained–everything else is a mirage.

Ineffable

The Self cannot be defined or evaluated in the terms of relative existence or relative objects–none of which exist outside the Self. Consequently the Self cannot be intellectually understood or even defined. Nevertheless, the Self can be known in a manner beyond any ordinary knowing, for It can be experienced as both object and subject–a quality unique to Itself.

Attained by the wise

The Self is attainable. Those who at present are ignorant of the Self can become knowers of the Self. Although only the knowers of the Self are fully worthy of being called wise, we can certainly call those who are seeking the Self also wise. All of us can be the potentially wise if we follow the path to Self-knowledge as outlined in the upanishads, the Gita, and the Yoga Darshan of Patanjali.

A necessary question

Nachiketa has declared the Self to be Supreme, yet he prudently follows that statement with a question to dispel any possibility that he may be misunderstanding Yama's teaching: Does the Self shine by Itself, is Light Its essential nature, or does It reflect another's light? This is a most crucial inquiry. Is the Self Light, or is Its light drawn from a source other than the Self. This is a question that penetrates to the foundations of the cosmos, demanding a clear insight.

The sublime answer

"Him the sun does not illumine, nor the moon, nor the stars, nor the lightning–nor, verily, fires kindled upon the earth. He is the one light that gives light to all. He shining, everything shines."[262] So Yama answers his worthy pupil's worthy question.

Nothing of heaven or earth illumines the Self or causes It to be radiant. Rather, It is swayamprakash–self-luminous. Furthermore, it is the Self that illumines all beings. "He is the one light that gives light to all." The Self is the essential nature of all sentient beings that "shine" with consciousness. "He shining, everything shines."

All glory to the blissful, supreme, and ineffable Self! All glory to the wise who strive to attain that Self as well as the supremely wise who have attained It!

[262] Katha Upanishad 2:2:15

The Universal Tree

"This universe is a tree eternally existing, its root aloft its branches spread below. The pure root of the tree is Brahman, the immortal, in whom the three worlds have their being, whom none can transcend, who is verily the Self."[263]

Little needs to be said about this verse, its meaning is quite obvious. We can, however, infer a significant principle: all things are rooted above in the Supreme Consciousness, in Brahman. Everything has Brahman for its essential Being. From this we get the Hermetic principle: As Above, So Below. Applying this principle to our own experience we can come to understand a great deal about the higher–and truer–nature of what is arising and subsiding in our life. Original Christianity, being rooted in the upanishadic teachings of Jesus (Isha Nath), taught the same, and that is why in the oldest text of Christian hymns, *The Odes of Solomon*, we find this: "The likeness of that which is below is that which is above. For everything is above, and below there is nothing, but it is believed to be by those in whom there is no knowledge."[264] That is, the ignorant believe that "things" have an independent existence–an existence that can cease–rather than the truth that they are not only rooted in Brahman, they are an imperishable extension of Brahman. "For in him we live, and move, and have our being...for we are also his offspring"[265] as Saint Paul pointed out. "And he is before all things, and by him all things consist."[266] David simply sang: "For with thee is the fountain of life: in thy light shall we see light."[267] Brahman is the ultimate state and stage of being. There is no transcending Brahman, for Brahman is truly the Self of all.

From this we see the principle only (comparatively) recently discovered by science: that in essence all things are immortal, that there is not a single atomic particle in creation that can go out of existence, that the changes we think are death and birth are only rearrangements of the living energies of which all consist.

A yogic aspect

Though yoga is not the subject of this verse, we can extract some important yogic information from it.

Since we are miniature cosmoses, little universes, our origin is also "above" in the root ball of the brain, the Thousand-petalled Lotus, the Sahasrara. Therefore, to experience that Source, in meditation we orient our attention toward the head, and we invoke the "pure root" of our being in the form of Om, which is the same as Brahman.

The fearless Source

"The whole universe came forth from Brahman and moves in Brahman. Mighty and awful is he, like to a thunderbolt crashing loud through the heavens. For those who attain him death

[263] Katha Upanishad 2:3:1

[264] Odes of Solomon 34:4, 5

[265] Acts 17:28

[266] Colossians 1:17

[267] Psalms 36:9

has no terror."[268]

"Awful" is outdated English. "Awesome" is much more correct. (In older forms of English, "awful," "horrible," and "terrible" all meant awesome, and were positive, but at this point in time they have reversed polarity and become negative descriptions.)

Brahman is Inexorable Power as well as Infinite Consciousness. His presence is like the thunderbolt whose light blinds us to all lesser lights, whose Creative Sound is Om expanding through the Chidakasha, the Ether of Consciousness, in which all things exist–and of which they consist. Those who unite with this Brahman experience their eternal immortality and become fearless, especially in the face of the mirage called death.

The Divine Will

In fear of him fire burns, the sun shines, the rains fall, the winds blow, and death kills. (Katha Upanishad 2:3:3)

Here, too, a state of ecstatic awe and wonder is meant. In older English, which Prabhavananda is using, "fear" meant to be filled with awe and respect–not to be afraid. So when we read in the older Bible translations that we should fear God we are actually being told to reverence God.

In awesome reverence of Brahman the creation responds to the Supreme Will–for it is itself an extension of Brahman, as already said. All that occurs is the movement of Divine Consciousness, is response to Divine Will. Brahman moves Brahman, and creation manifests and moves onward. Brahman ceases to move Brahman, and creation resolves into its potential, causal form and seems to cease. At all times it is Brahman reacting upon–and to–Brahman. Even death is only a change of Life.

The root of rebirth

"If a man fail to attain Brahman before he casts off his body, he must again put on a body in the world of created things."[269]

Perfect knowledge of Brahman resulting from total union of our consciousness with Brahman's Consciousness is the only passport beyond this world–or any worlds of relative existence. Knowledge is the root determinant of our rebirth or our freedom from rebirth. This is why most religion is so useless–it deals with "good" and "bad," with "truth" and "error," on the tiny level of individual human mentalities. The infinite scope of Brahmic Consciousness simply does not come into its purview. Human beings waste lifetimes with such mundane religions that only program them for more and more births upon this earth. Even their ideas of the afterlife and "heaven" only condition them for more birth and bondage. Degenerate Christianity, especially, with its doctrine of physical resurrection and immortality instills material consciousness in its adherents, condemning them to the wheel of perpetual birth and death. Thinking they are "creatures," they sink into the quagmire of "creation." Actually, they impel themselves into the morass, calling it the will of God. As Jesus said: "If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!"[270] If our "truth" be actually untruth, its blinding–and binding–power is nigh well inescapable.

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[268] Katha Upanishad 2:3:2

[269] Katha Upanishad 2:3:4

[270] Matthew 6:23

The realm of realization

"In one's own soul Brahman is realized clearly, as if seen in a mirror. In the heaven of Brahma also is Brahman realized clearly, as one distinguishes light from darkness. In the world of the fathers he is beheld as in a dream. In the world of angels he appears as if reflected in water."[271]

First, this verse should put the lie to the absurd claim in contemporary Hinduism that enlightenment is impossible unless the individual is born on earth in a human body. What is the truth is the fact that the highest realm of relativity, the heaven of Brahma (Brahmaloka) is the only one in which the capacity for realizing Brahman is inherent in the form proper to that world. In all other worlds the incarnational form is the bar to such realization, for in the minds of the inhabitants of those worlds Brahman appears only as a dream or a reflection in water.

The most important fact, though, is the statement that Brahman can be "seen" and experienced in the Self of each one of us–no matter what world we may or may not inhabit. We need not aspire to ascend to any other world, thinking that incarnation there is necessary for our spiritual liberation. Not at all. Whatever world we may be in, whatever form we may find ourselves incarnate in, we can realize Brahman perfectly. Why? Because our Self is one with Brahman. This is why we sometimes read in the lore of India about animals that at their death attained moksha (liberation). It is all in the knowing, the jnana.

[271] Katha Upanishad 2:3:5

Hierarchy of Consciousness

The senses

"The senses have separate origin in their several objects. They may be active, as in the waking state, or they may be inactive, as in sleep. He who knows them to be distinct from the changeless Self grieves no more."[272]

If a lost person could somehow be lifted up high and see his surroundings from that perspective, he could easily see his way out of his confusion. In the same way, those who are lost in the jungle of the senses can find their way by heeding the wisdom of the upanishads.

Sense experience is just that–the experiences of the senses themselves. The Self witnesses these experiences and thinks that it is really undergoing them and being affected by them. This produces great fear and suffering, what to say of the mountain-high heaps of illusions and delusions those experiences produce–not in the Self, but in the mind. The Self, however, attributes these things to itself and fears and suffers even more. Whether the senses are active or inactive, the potential suffering is ever there. If, however, we can realize that such perceptions are utterly separate from us, from our Self, all fear and sorrow cease forever. But we must *realize* that truth, not just accept it or act as though it is so. In other words, we must become yogis, for only yogis realize the truth of the Self and the error of the Not-Self.

The hierarchy

"Above the senses is the mind. Above the mind is the intellect. Above the intellect is the ego. Above the ego is the unmanifested seed, the Primal Cause. And verily beyond the unmanifested seed is Brahman, the all-pervading spirit, the unconditioned, knowing whom one attains to freedom and achieves immortality."[273]

It will be good to do some vocabulary building at this point.

By "senses" is meant the five organs of perception: ear, skin, eye, tongue, and nose.[274] Often the word "senses" really refers to the five sense perceptions.

By "mind" is meant the sensory mind; the perceiving faculty that receives the messages of the senses.

"Intellect" is the faculty of understanding, of reason–the thinking mind.

The "ego" is the false "I"–egoism or self-conceit. It is also the self-arrogating principle "I" that is projected by the mind rather than the real Self. "Ego" is in manifestation whenever "I" is said or claimed by anything other than the spirit-self.

"The unmanifested seed, the Primal Cause" is Prabhavananda's translation of two terms: Mahat (Tattwa) and Avyakta. The Mahat Tattwa, or "Great Principle" is the first evolute from Prakriti. It is the principle of Cosmic Intelligence (Buddhi). The Avyakta is the Unmanifest, the primal Prakriti, from which all things evolve.

It is necessary for us to be aware of this hierarchy, for the lesser levels can be controlled from the higher levels, thus saving a great deal of time and frustration.

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[272] Katha Upanishad 2:3:6

[273] Katha Upanishad 2:3:7, 8

[274] Sometimes by "senses" are meant the five organs of action: voice, hand, foot, organ of excretion, and the organ of generation.

The Supreme, the Source

Beyond all these various levels that are the machinery of the individual and the cosmos is That which is the Supreme, the Source of all. Regarding That, the upanishad continues: "And verily beyond the unmanifested seed is Brahman, the all-pervading spirit, the unconditioned, knowing whom one attains to freedom and achieves immortality."[275]

The Self and Brahman being one, it is the knowledge of our Self that bestows upon us freedom and immortality.

To know the Self

But how do we know this Self–not merely hear about It or believe in It, but truly know it by direct experience?

"None beholds him with the eyes, for he is without visible form. Yet in the heart is he revealed, through self-control and meditation. Those who know him become immortal."[276]

What could be simpler? We enter into the heart, into the Chidakasha (not the physical organ called "the heart") that is at the core of our being. There the Self is revealed to the disciplined meditator. Immortality is the result of such knowing. The upanishad continues with a description of the process that leads to Self-knowledge.

"When all the senses are stilled, when the mind is at rest, when the intellect wavers not–then, say the wise, is reached the highest state."[277]

This is extremely, *extremely* important. Because of the razzamatazz of the Yoga Carnival that has been rioting on from the last century, nearly everyone thinks that the highest state involves chills and thrills in the form of inner sensory experiences of cataclysmic proportion, including "opening of chakras" and "rising of kundalini." Notice that the upanishad says nothing like that–nor does the Gita or the Yoga Sutras. What it does tell us is that the pure consciousness that is Reality is experienced "when all the senses are stilled, when the mind is at rest, when the intellect wavers not." That, and that alone, is the highest state which in time becomes permanent and is itself liberation.

Yoga

Obviously much that is called yoga is not yoga at all. This is brought out by the next verse: "This calm of the senses and the mind has been defined as yoga. He who attains it is freed from delusion. In one not freed from delusion this calm is uncertain, unreal: it comes and goes."[278]

The state of calm, or steadiness (sthiram) in awareness of awareness itself, is yoga. This frees us from delusion because it makes us aware of our true nature as the Self. In those who have not attained perfection this state comes and goes. The upanishad tells us this so we will not be foolish enough to think that experiencing it once or even a few times is enough and wrongly think we are enlightened. (People claim enlightenment on the basis of much less.) We must practice diligently to become permanently established in it.

Although I have told about Lahiri Mahashaya's teaching on the subject of this state–which

[275] Katha Upanishad 2:3:8

[276] Katha Upanishad 2:3:9

[277] Katha Upanishad 2:3:10

[278] Katha Upanishad 2:3:11

he called sthirattwa–in the Gita commentary, I would like to repeat it here.

Yogiraj Shyama Charan Lahiri Mahasaya continually expounded the idea that the goal of yoga is to be established in *sthirattwa*, in perfect tranquility.

"A group of spiritual leaders from Calcutta once conspired against Lahiri Mahasay. They invited him to join in an evening discussion on spiritual matters. Lahiri Mahasay accepted the invitation and accordingly attended the meeting.

"The conspirators had well prepared themselves to trap Lahiri Mahasay. For example, if Lahiri Mahasay were to express his preference for a particular deity, or *Istadev*, 'desired Lord,' then a particular leader would find exception to that choice.

"In fact, each member of the group selected a particular *Devata*, 'deity' such as Lord Vishnu, Lord Krishna, Lord Siva, the Goddess Kali (the Divine Mother) and prepared to debate and challenge Lahiri Mahasay's choice.

"As soon as Lahiri Mahasay arrived, he was received in the traditional manner and shown proper courtesy. After a while one of the members of the group asked Lahiri Mahasay, 'Upon which deity do you meditate?'

"Lahiri Mahasay looked at him but did not reply. Then another gentleman asked him, 'Who is your *Istadev*, "desired deity?"' Lahiri Mahasay turned his head towards him and looked at him in the same way, while keeping his peace.

"Finally, a third gentleman asked him, 'Can you tell us upon which deity usually you meditate?'

"Lahiri Mahasay faced him and said very gently, 'I meditate on *Sthirattva* (Tranquility).'

"The gentleman replied that he did not understand what was meant by this. Lahiri Mahasay continued to observe silence. After some time, another gentleman asked him, 'Could you please explain this? I do not understand exactly what you are saying.'

"Lahiri Mahasay, as before, continued to maintain silence. Another gentleman asked, 'Can you enlighten me as to what you mean by that? I do not understand at all!' Lahiri Baba told him, 'You will not be able to understand, and also I will not be able to make you understand (realize) through words.'

"The group was at a loss. All of their preparation and conniving had come to naught. Only silence prevailed. All kept silent.

"After a long time Lahiri Mahasay got up and silently prepared to leave the meeting. All showed him the traditional courtesy as he left."

As Paramhansa Yogananda, who made Lahiri Mahashaya known in the West, often said: "He who knows, knows–none else knows."

How can Brahman be known?

"Brahman words cannot reveal, mind cannot reach, eyes cannot see. How then, save through those who know him, can he be known?"[279]

Brahman can only be truly known by direct experience in meditation. This verse is not speaking of that ultimate knowing, but of the "knowing about" Brahman so we can be stimulated to seek Brahman. Empty words and intellectual ponderings cannot bring about this knowing, nor can our mind and senses. But those who know of Brahman–even imperfectly–possess a spiritual power in their presence and in their words which convey an intuitive glimmer of the reality of Brahman. That glimmer, entering into our hearts through contact with them, causes

[279] Katha Upanishad 2:3:12

our inmost awareness to awaken, arise, and respond, and seek the full realization of Brahman for ourselves. This is why the company of sadhakas is essential for the questing soul. It is like one candle lighting another.

The two selves

"There are two selves, the apparent self and the real Self. Of these it is the real Self, and he alone, who must be felt as truly existing. To the man who has felt him as truly existing he reveals his innermost nature."[280]

It is common in Western metaphysical thought to speak of the "lower self" that is not truly the Self, but the lesser aspects of human existence, and the "higher self" that is the real Self. We must distinguish between the two, and this impossible without enough inner development making possible the intuition of the Self, even if It is not directly known. One who has this intuition, if intelligent, will then begin to seek to know the Self, to become a yogi in some manner. To such a one who perseveres, the Self will be revealed in Its fulness. As Swami Gambhirananda renders the first part of this verse: "The Self is to be realized as existing, and then as It really is." This realization is what is meant by distinguishing between the unreal and the Real.

[280] Katha Upanishad 2:3:13

From Mortality to Immortality

"Lead me from death to immortality" is part of a prayer at the beginning of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. In this final part of the Katha Upanishad we are given practical understanding of the way in which immortality is gained.

"The mortal in whose heart desire is dead becomes immortal. The mortal in whose heart the knots of ignorance are untied becomes immortal. These are the highest truths taught in the scriptures."[281]

When desire dies, when ignorance drops away, immortality is revealed. Practically speaking, we "become" immortal, but in reality we have always been immortal. Yet, like a millionaire who thinks he is a pauper, our immortality is of little meaning to us until we come to realize and experience it.

Furthermore, the upanishad tells us that in essence this truth is the only spiritual teaching there is–not just "the highest truths" as Prabhavananda renders it.. Shankara says that this is the only teaching in all the upanishads, however varying the approaches may be. The aspirant must not lose himself in philosophical byways, including those set forth in mountains of books on Yoga and Vedanta. He must keep his vision clear and focused by understanding that liberation is the only "point" the upanishads ever make.

Attaining immortality

It is easy to tell ourselves to rid ourselves of desire and ignorance, but how is that to be done, especially since we have been in the grip of these two ogres for creation cycles? The upanishad gives us the yogic key to rising above desire and ignorance into immortality:

"Radiating from the lotus of the heart there are a hundred and one nerves. One of these ascends toward the thousand-petaled lotus in the brain. If, when a man comes to die, his vital force passes upward and out through this nerve, he attains immortality; but if his vital force passes out through another nerve, he goes to one or another plane of mortal existence and remains subject to birth and death."[282]

It is noteworthy that this comes at the very end of the upanishad. Yogananda used to say: "Yoga is the beginning of the end." So it is appropriate that after all the philosophical exposition the yoga teaching should be given.

By "heart" is meant the hub–located in the midst of the upper trunk of the body–of subtle passages known as nadis (here translated "nerves") through which the life force (prana) circulates throughout the gross and subtle bodies, just as the blood circulates from the heart through the veins of the physical body. One hundred of these nadis direct the life force to the life processes of the bodies and are the forces of embodiment. One, unique, nadi, however, rises directly upward from the heart-hub into the head. If at the time of death the departing spirit leaves through that channel, he gains immortality. But if his consciousness attaches itself to any of the hundred other nadis he will be impelled into the subtle worlds that lead inexorably back to incarnation in relativity.

It is supremely necessary for us to realize that this nadi rises from the heart directly into

[281] Katha Upanishad 2:3:14, 15

[282] Katha Upanishad 2:3:16

the head–that it is not a passage in the midst of the spine. In japa and meditation, through our intoning of Om in time with the breath we activate this channel, causing the life force to spontaneously and continuously flow upward into the thousand-petalled lotus in the head. At the end of life, having prepared himself by this practice, sitting in meditation the yogi ascends upward from the body into the realm of immortality.

The Supreme Person

Who is liberated in this manner? In conclusion to his teaching, Yama tells Nachiketa:

"The Supreme Person, of the size of a thumb, the innermost Self, dwells forever in the heart of all beings. As one draws the pith from a reed, so must the aspirant after truth, with great perseverance, separate the Self from the body. Know the Self to be pure and immortal–yea, pure and immortal!"[283]

If the Self is seen, immaterial as it is, it will appear as an oval light, in the shape of a human thumb. (The shape is also that of a Shiva Linga, which is a symbol of the Self.) Those who have seen this are unanimous in describing it in the manner of the upanishad. In my early teens I met a Christian minister who described the death of his twin brother. He said that at the moment of death his brother's mouth opened, and as he exhaled for the final time, a white light shaped like a thumb emerged from his mouth and passed from the room.

It is through meditation, as I have described it, that we daily work on the separation of the Self from the body which will finally occur at the time of death. Not that we leave our body in meditation, but we begin conditioning all our bodies so they will not hold on to us at the final moments. As the fully ripened kernel of a nut pulls away from the shell so that when it is cracked the kernel comes out in full separation, so will it be with our Self in relation to the body. Sri Ramakrishna described it as being like the release of a fish back into the river.

May these final words of Yama echo within us: "Know the Self to be pure and immortal–yea, pure and immortal!"

Nachiketa–and us

Now the upanishadic sage gives us a final assurance:

"Nachiketa, having learned from the god this knowledge and the whole process of yoga, was freed from impurities and from death, and was united with Brahman. Thus will it be with another also if he know the innermost Self."[284]

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[283] Katha Upanishad 2:3:17

[284] Katha Upanishad 2:3:18

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